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E. Kazakevich

SPRING
ON THE ODER

A Novel

STALIN PRIZE

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TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN BY
ROBERT DAGLISH

DESIGNED BY

Y. YEGOROV

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SRI PRATAP COLLEGE
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Part One
★
Major
of the Guards



Lt. Col. Sri P. V. S. College,
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I

ONE MISTY winter morning when the crows were cawing as insistently and hoarsely as their kin near Moscow, a neat little pine forest appeared round a bend in the road, exactly like the one through which the soldiers had just passed. But this was Germany.

For the time being, however, that was known only at Headquarters. The soldiers, the ordinary men without maps, missed the great moment and it was only in the evening that they found out where they were.

And then they looked upon the soil of Germany, this well-tilled soil defended since ancient times by Slav strongholds and Russian swords against the barbarian invasions from the east. They saw the neat woods and orderly fields, studded with cottages and barns, planted with flowers and hedges. It was difficult to believe that from this land, so ordinary in appearance, there had risen a plague which threatened the whole world.

"So that's what you are like!" said one stocky Russian soldier thoughtfully, for the first time calling Germany to her face "you" instead of the abstract and hostile "she" he had called her for the past four years. And the soldiers thought too of the great Stalin who had led them here. At the thought of him they looked at each other and their eyes widened with the proud feeling of their own invincible strength.

"So that's the kind of men we are!"

Troops were moving along the road in an unceasing stream. Infantry, lorries, long-barrelled guns and snub-nosed howitzers were heading westwards. From time to time the stream halted because of some clumsy driver and indignant shouts rose from all sides. True, in these shouts, usual enough on a jammed front-line road, that former note of irritation and anger was now missing. Everybody had become kinder to each other.

The columns started again and the infantry command: "Right wheel!" resounded; the traffic regulators waved their flags, and it would all have been very ordinary and rather boring if it were not for the words: "We are in Germany," rushing like wine to everybody's head and gleaming like fire in everybody's eyes.

Had there been a poet among this mass of people his eyes would have been dazzled by the great multitude of impressions.

Indeed every man on this road could easily become the hero of a poem or story. Why not describe this picturesque group of soldiers with a huge sergeant standing out among them, whose face is either so sunburnt that his hair seems white or whose hair is so fair that his face seems dark?

Or these cheerful artillerymen clinging to their huge cannon like birds on a tree?

Or this thin young signaller who has been dragging his wire coil with him almost from the villages round Moscow and has now carried it right on to German soil?

Or these good-looking, clear-eyed nurses perching so importantly on a lorry loaded with tents and medical supplies? At the sight of them a soldier's shoulders somehow straighten up, his chest sticks out, his eyes shine. . . .

And over there a car has appeared on the road, carrying a famous general. Behind it an armoured troop carrier follows with a heavy calibre machine gun pointed

threateningly upward. Why not write about this general, about his sleepless nights and famous battles?

Behind each one of these people lie two thousand kilometres of fabulous exploits.

An unusual spectacle has caught the attention of the soldiers and set them all laughing.

Along the road, wet with melting snow, a carriage was speeding. Yes, it was an elegant, old-fashioned carriage, tinted with purple varnish. At the back protruded the steps for the liveried grooms. On the doors gleamed a blue and gold coat of arms: a stag's head with branching antlers, on the right, the jagged battlements of a castle, on the left, a helmet with a vizor, above and below—a Latin motto: "Pro Deo et Patria." However, on the high coachman's box sat not a count's lackey but a young soldier in a wadded jacket, clicking his tongue and urging on his horses like a real old Russian coachman.

"Gee-up, my beauties!"

The soldiers cheered on the carriage with shouts, whistles and jokes:

"Heh! Where's the funeral!"

"Look! They've got a corpse on board!"

"Fellows! The museum's coming! . . ."

The "coachman" tried to preserve an unruffled mien but his beardless, flushed face quivered with barely restrained laughter.

The passengers in this strange conveyance were travelling together by chance. Either they were trying to catch up with their own units or were going on to new assignments. Young Captain Chokhov, a man of few words, had found the carriage at the gates of a country manor. An old Pole, serving on the estate, explained that for lack of petrol the baron, his master, had intended to flee westwards in it but did not have time to do so: Russian tanks had gone past—and so the baron changed his clothes and went off on foot.

Promising to pick up the runaway baron and teach him a lesson if he ran across him, Captain Chokhov set off to catch up with the unit to which he had been assigned. There were many cars going in the same direction but Captain Chokhov liked independence. On the way he picked up two soldiers and the number grew as they travelled. On the very next kilometre they were joined by a young, well-built woman-doctor with captain's shoulder tabs and, half an hour later, by a lieutenant with a bandaged hand who was returning from a hospital.

A conversation began which was shortly interrupted by a newcomer, a broad-shouldered, blue-eyed Major who jumped lightly on to the carriage step. He threw a humorous glance at the satin upholstery and said mockingly:

"Red Army's compliments to the honoured count's family."

Nobody noticed how the woman gasped softly and fixed her huge, grey eyes, which had suddenly become radiant, on the Major. Nor did the Major notice this. He went on:

"I've travelled on anything you like: boats, rafts, in air sledges and reindeer sleds—but never in a carriage! Now I'll see what it's like!"

His lively talk, filled with a merry humour, immediately broke through the reserve which usually grips such chance gatherings. Everyone started laughing and taking notice of each other in a friendly way, like children caught at some forbidden prank. In the blue eyes of the Major glowed that friendly, joyous spark which usually expresses something like this: "I love all of you sitting here, without distinction of sex, age or nationality because you are my friends although strangers to me; kinsmen although distant, because we are all from the Soviet Union and all share in one and the same task." People with such a spark in their eyes are loved by children and soldiers.

The "feudal" horses, whipped on by a young collective farmer, galloped along even more merrily. The Major almost fell down on the seat, then glanced at the woman, and exclaimed:

"Wait a moment! Is it you, Tanya?" and he grasped her hand firmly, suddenly becoming serious.

Everybody felt glad about the chance meeting of the two people, acquainted, perhaps, since the almost forgotten times before the war. But suspecting something romantic in this, everyone, after the usual remarks befitting such occasions ("What? Met a friend of yours?" "What a coincidence!" etc.), tactfully turned aside, giving the Major and the woman-doctor a chance to talk and perhaps even to kiss.

There were no kisses, however. Although the acquaintance of Major of the Guards, Sergei Platonovich Lubentsov with Captain of the Medical Service, Tatyana Vladimirovna Koltsova was a very old one, it had been fortuitous and short: for six days they had been together in the same group escaping from encirclement between Vyazma and Moscow during the memorable year 1941.

Lubentsov was a lieutenant then. Still very young, not more than twenty-two years old, even in those days he appeared gay, although this outward gaiety cost him no little effort of will. But he had considered it almost his Komsomol duty to appear gay in those difficult days.

He was marching with the remnants of his platoon and all the time, fighting men, singly and in small groups, who had lost their own units were joining him. Some of those men were depressed, many were unaccustomed to the jobs of war. He had to cheer them, reassure them and finally, simply to prepare them for battle in the face of many dangers.

Once, when bivouacking, in a marsh overgrown with thickets, someone, groaning softly with exhaustion, asked:

"But perhaps we shan't be able to get through?"

Lubentsov, just then, was cutting a thick stick with a Finnish knife. He was making a stretcher for a tank-man who had been wounded in both legs. Hearing the question, he answered:

"Well, perhaps we shan't." And after a pause he added unexpectedly: "But that's not the point."

Bewildered grumbling was heard. Lubentsov explained with deliberate carelessness:

"We'll stay in the German rear as partisans. Aren't we a unit ourselves? We've even got our own doctor," he nodded towards Tanya, "and we'll have enough arms."

Where did he find his confidence and firmness in those difficult days? He was born and bred in the Amur Taiga, he was tough, an excellent pathfinder, and he knew a host of useful things about life in the forest. But that was not the root of the matter. There burned within the Lieutenant an absolute certainty of final victory over any enemy. This certainty at times even surprised Tanya who was almost collapsing from the long march, the unusual hardships and the sadness of her thoughts.

She had joined the army in the field straight from the Medical Institute and had barely had time to begin carrying out her duties in a regimental aid station when German tanks broke through and advanced towards Moscow.

The young Lieutenant soon began to treat Tanya, the only woman in his party, with special attention, behind which there was more than ordinary sympathy.

He was so sorry for her that it hurt him. She was so pale, so large-eyed and so sad that he was ready to carry her on his shoulders along these autumn-rutted tracks, thick with clinging mud and hedged in with wet, red bushes. She walked on silent and uncomplaining without looking aside, and this silence of hers and her presence itself had a beneficial influence on the others. She, of course, did not know this but Lubentsov knew it and sometimes he reproached the laggards:

"You would do well to learn something from this girl...."

Thin ice would cover the puddles in the morning and the sky frowned threateningly. The Germans were near. Tanya was suffering; her hands were so frozen that she could not do her hair or wash her face. And all her thoughts seemed frozen too, except for one, "Oh, how bad I feel!" But this Lieutenant shaved himself every day with a safety razor, complained with a smile in his eye of the absence of boot polish and once even washed himself down to the waist beside a stream. At the mere sight of this bathing Tanya's teeth began to chatter.

She was grateful to him for everything: for the tiny campfire he built especially for her in bivouac—he had forbidden all campfires because of the danger; for the way he taught her to take care of her feet and for the way he looked at her sympathetically, saying from time to time:

"You are doing fine. You'll make a good soldier."

Active, tireless, with a good understanding of people, he had a word of encouragement not only for Tanya, but for everyone. Thanks to his determination and coolheadedness they all began to feel calmer and more confident.

Before dawn he usually went off with two men to reconnoitre. Once he came back gloomy and distracted. In the neighbouring village, he told the others, there were captured Russian soldiers, most of them slightly wounded. The badly wounded, he had discovered, had been shot on the road by the Germans.

"They are guarding the prisoners," he said after a pause, "but the guard is only fifteen men strong. There are no sentries posted."

Glancing questioninglly at the men gathered round him, he went on:

"And their means of communication is just a single wire ... cut it and it's all over."

There was silence. Suddenly a man in a peasant's sheepskin coat with an astrakhan collar stepped out in front. So far this man had trudged on silently, staring at his feet and taking no notice of anybody.

"There's no need to get mixed up in a fool's game," he said slowly and authoritatively. "It's a job beyond our strength. You say—there's fifteen of them and about fifty of us. All right. But them—they are regular troops. . . . Germans!"

The Lieutenant frowned and said:

"This is not a trade union meeting. It's a military unit, even if it is a mixture."

"You can't teach me army regulations, I know more about them than you do."

"All the better," retorted Lubentsov quietly. "Then you ought to know that I am in command of this unit and my orders must be obeyed."

"Who appointed you?" the man flared up. "Don't you know who I am? I'm a captain."

Lubentsov suddenly burst out laughing.

"Now, just what kind of a captain are you?" he said. "It's a sheepskin you are, not a captain!"

Crestfallen but still defiant, the man in the sheepskin asked:

"I suppose it was you that demoted me?"

"Why?" answered Lubentsov and, turning away, he added, "You have demoted yourself."

They freed the prisoners more easily than even Lubentsov had expected. The guards, taken by surprise, put up no resistance. They had been feeling too sure of themselves. Their arms were stacked neatly in the entrance of the village Soviet, and Lubentsov distributed the captured rifles among the liberated wounded, to whom Tanya gave what medical attention she could.

The group moved on at a quicker pace, for Lubentsov feared pursuit. They marched on in good heart as if the

campaign had only just begun, whispering animatedly to each other. No one wanted to sleep. Even the most inveterate grumblers' feet hurt no longer. They all exaggerated their victory and were delighted with the Lieutenant. For many that night marked the real beginning of their fighting lives.

The following night Tanya saw Germans for the first time.

It was pouring rain. The party had come out near the highway. Lorries were moving along it. At first Tanya paid no attention to them and marched on unheedingly, but the Lieutenant's hand was immediately on her shoulder.

"Down," he said softly. "Germans!"

She looked round in confusion. Where were the Germans? And then as she dropped to the ground she understood that these lorries—ordinary transport lorries with brightly gleaming headlights—were Germans. A few small tanks with black crosses appeared. Guttural talk reached Tanya.

It was all so strange, so absurd and hostile, that Tanya was at once surprised and horrified. She felt lonely and depressed, as if these strange, loathsome shadows had cut her off from all her past life, all her hopes, all her dreams. She grasped Lubentsov's hand and did not let it go for a long time, until the party moved on. The flashes of light from the German headlights faintly illuminated the Lieutenant's face. Raindrops crept down his cheeks. The young man's face was now inexpressibly grave and sad.

In the morning they at last reached their own lines. On the way to the assembly point, Lubentsov came up to Tanya and asked her to give him her address in Moscow:

"Perhaps we shall meet sometime, I'll drop in on you for a cup of tea."

This request surprised her again by that same certainty he always showed about the future, about the peaceful life which lay ahead with meetings, addresses, teas.

Her address? After graduating from the institute Tanya had lived in Moscow at her aunt's. But that was not the point.

"But I'm married," she said.

Of course that was not a very clever reply. After all he had not made a proposal to her.

"I'll give you my address of course," she added hastily.

But in the general hurry Tanya forgot her promise. They arrived at the assembly point, she was besieged by officers. There were many doctors among them. They gave her sweet tea to drink and fed her with tinned meat. Warmed and full of hope of meeting her mother and husband, she somehow quite forgot what this fearless, gay and kind lieutenant had been for her through the six most difficult days in her life.

The Lieutenant stood nearby for a moment and then went away, unnoticed. Afterwards she learned that he had left to join another unit. She had been grieved to hear it and regretted that she had not said a grateful word to him in farewell.

And now, more than three years later, this Lieutenant, now a Major of the Guards, was sitting beside her flying along the wet asphalt in a carriage.

II

It was an amazing meeting. They were both excited.

"You are still as gay," she said, "nothing gets you down."

"And you are still a little sad," he replied, "but more grownup."

"Older," she laughed.

She had a sweet laugh; it was warm and soft, as if to herself. When she laughed her big eyes almost disappeared into sparkling chinks and her nose wrinkled up, giving her face a rather unexpected expression of extreme good-naturedness.

At that moment the loud, excited voice of the "coachman" was heard shouting from above:

"Comrades officers! They say we're in Germany...."

Lubentsov looked round hastily, then opened his field bag, took out a map and spread it on his knees.

"Yes, we are in Germany," he said with a deep breath.

The Lieutenant whipped out his pistol, flung open the door and fired off the whole magazine into the air. The "coachman" fired his rifle. The frightened horses put on speed. Everybody was hanging out of the windows. Meadows, forest clearings, bushes flashed by and they marvelled at how ordinary it all looked:

"Look, lime trees!"

"Hawthorn!"

"Apple trees!"

The Lieutenant opened his box, rummaged in it and exclaimed ruefully:

"But there's no vodka!"

Without a word the "owner" of the carriage, Captain Chokhov, produced a flask of vodka. A soldier, smiling in embarrassment, stroked his ginger moustache and said:

"We've got some spirits, comrades officers.... If you aren't squeamish ... it's rather disgusting stuff but it's strong. *Zveroboi*."*

The carriage swung off the road and, bumping over the knolls, soon came to a standstill in a grove of trees. The "coachman" thrust the enormous whip into its rest

* "Beast Killer"—a strong brand of vodka.

on the box, and joined the others. Everybody began talking noisily—only Tanya for some reason was quiet. She climbed up onto the high coachman's seat and sat there rather sadly, all hunched up, looking with an absent smile at the scattered clumps of trees. She would not drink.

"This is not the time for drinking," she said, pushing the cup aside. "I don't know what we should do, perhaps we should weep in sorrow for those who fell on the way."

Everyone understood that she was right. Although they did of course drink, they went about it without joking and rather solemnly.

First of all they drank to Stalin, then to victory and to the troops of the First Byelorussian Front. The soldier with the ginger moustache also proposed a toast. "To our family front, to our wives and kids."

"And to the husbands, of course," he added, looking out of the corner of his eye at Tanya, "if there are any and, if not, to the husbands-to-be."

Tanya said:

"But just think of it! That's a German village over there. I can hardly believe that it's Germans who live there, the very people who have done so much harm in the world. What now? Set fire to the place? Kill everybody there?"

They were all silent. Then they heard the voice of Captain Chokhov.

"And why not? Come on, let's do it."

These words, spoken in a calm voice, focussed all eyes on Chokhov. They all saw his round youthful face, little straight nose and determined grey eyes. In those eyes shone the defiant self-confidence of a man who fears nothing.

Major Lubentsov looked searchingly at him and just waved his hand. That short, rather contemptuous, gesture

was perhaps more eloquent than words. Everyone realized that there would be no burning anything or killing anybody, at least not in the presence of the Guards Major.

Chokhov realized it too. He gave Lubentsov a hostile look, compressed his lips and did not say another word.

"The German army is still fighting desperately," said Lubentsov dryly. "You will have the chance to display your ardour in battle."

Tanya ended the conversation with a conciliatory "Let's get on!"

They all climbed back into the carriage, which soon rolled noisily into the village. Here they were greeted with an enormous notice posted on the little town hall:

Sieg oder Sibirien!*

Lubentsov translated aloud this rather obscure slogan, apparently the latest invention of Goebbels.

"Why Fritz is scaring Fritz with our Siberia," said Ginger almost a little offended. "But all I want is to live till victory and get back to my Siberia to Vasilissa Karpovna and the kids."

The "coachman" halted the carriage outside one of the houses. It was a handsome, brick house with a high porch; inside, it was quiet and dark and smelt of rot. While the "coachman" was unharnessing the horses, the others dispersed noisily into the cold rooms, peeping curiously into the dark corners.

Suddenly the "coachman" appeared on the threshold. He was looking worried.

"Comrade Major, there's something wrong over there in the barn."

* Victory or Siberia!

They went out. Pigs were rooting in the darkness of the yard. The barn was full of firewood. And behind the dark mass of logs, Lubentsov's torch picked out the shapes of five hanging bodies.

"Damn!" he cursed. "Cut them down!" and began slashing the ropes with his knife.

The bodies thudded heavily to the floor. The Lieutenant and Chokhov entered the barn. The Lieutenant helped fussily. Chokhov stood aside. His cigarette glowed in the darkness.

Two showed signs of life, an old woman and a little girl. They were carried into the house. Tanya began to revive them. Soon the girl was sitting beside Tanya on the sofa, rubbing her neck with one hand and firmly clasping the hand of this unknown woman with the other. The old woman, without looking at the silent Russians surrounding her, began shuffling heavily about, picking up things strewn on the floor.

Lubentsov knew a little German, and although his stock of words was confined almost exclusively to a military vocabulary, he nevertheless succeeded in questioning the old woman.

It appeared that her son, a local Nazi functionary, had not had time to evacuate and in his terrible panic had decided to hang himself and his whole family. The night before Russian tanks had gone past and that day Soviet troops had been going through ever since morning. Realizing that escape was impossible, the master of the house had carried out his plan.

"Are these human beings?" said the Siberian with the ginger moustache disgustedly, as he stoked up the stove. "That fascist didn't care about anybody, not even his own children. The dirty swine must have strung them up with his own hands."

"Your son," the "coachman" was explaining to the old woman, striking his forehead with his finger, "he was

a bad one . . . Verstehen? How could anybody," he shouted, probably thinking the louder he shouted the better he would be understood. "Look . . ." he waved his arm towards the girl, "such a little one," his hand dropped to the floor, "hang," and he pointed his finger at his neck.

The old woman began to make up the beds for the Russians. This she did without a trace of servility; she had stood too recently on the threshold of death to fawn before anyone. It was simply the proper thing, the Russians were the victors and they had a right to expect submission from the vanquished.

But Lubentsov, as a soldier, could not rely on belated German submission. He therefore decided to mount a guard to be on the safe side. After painstakingly working out a schedule of watches and alarm signals, Lubentsov said finally: "You may as well all go to bed and I will stand guard until morning. I shan't sleep tonight."

"May I stand guard with you?" asked Tanya from a far corner of the room.

"Of course!" exclaimed Lubentsov.

As if by agreement, they all dispersed at once to their own places except for Lubentsov and Tanya, who sat on at the table for some time. Then they dressed to go on duty.

Soft snoring was already filling the house. Before going out into the street they inspected all the rooms. Captain Chokhov was sleeping in the dining room on the couch. In sleep his round face had lost its characteristic expression of defiant self-confidence and looked very young. In the next room the Lieutenant was turning restlessly on his bed. He slept in his old winter cap, ground his teeth in his sleep and mumbled. On the huge double bed lay Ginger and the "coachman." Both of them were in their clothes, boots and all, and covered with greatcoats, although beneath them lay a whole pile of blankets. From under the soldiers' greatcoats protruded

the barrels of a sub-machine gun and a rifle; they, too, seemed to be asleep.

Beside them on a small bed slept the little German girl.

Lubentsov laughed softly at the "sleeping" rifles and the Spartan simplicity of the soldiers—war had made them ready for battle at any time.

They went out into the courtyard. It was very dark and windy. From the road came the dull tramp of marching feet and the hooting of motor vehicles. Under the big trees something moved. Lubentsov shone his torch. The old woman was digging a pit with a spade.

"What is she doing that for?" asked Tanya in an undertone.

Lubentsov went up to the old woman and spoke to her; she went into a long and detailed explanation about something. Returning to Tanya, Lubentsov said:

"She's digging a grave. They don't bury suicides in the cemetery, you see . . . I think that's what she meant."

They went out into the street and stood for a moment silently. Then Tanya asked:

"What is your job now?"

"Division reconnaissance officer. I am on my way back from Army Headquarters. They asked for me. Wanted to send me to study at the Military Academy in Moscow. I hardly managed to get out of it. It would be a pity, somehow, to go back to the rear, and not to fight to the end. Especially now, just before the very end. And I did not want to desert my scouts, got used to them. Our division has become like my own home to me. It took some doing to persuade them at Headquarters. Lucky they didn't send me . . . or else I'd be somewhere near Minsk by now. . . ." He was silent for a moment, then added: "And I should not have met you."

It turned out they had quite a few mutual acquaintances. Tanya had formerly worked in one of the army hospitals and knew the army reconnaissance chief,

Colonel Malyshev. Now she was returning from a surgeons' conference. She was the chief surgeon in Colonel Vorobyov's division.

"I know him too," said Lubentsov. "A good commander. But my Divisional Commander, General Sereda, is even better."

"Oh, you like everybody." She smiled and, glancing sideways at him, said softly: "How wonderful that you have come safely through this dreadful war. It has taken away so many fine people! Especially in your job. I am very glad I met you." After a moment's silence, she asked: "Do you know Colonel Krasikov from Corps Headquarters?"

"Slightly."

They walked slowly along the front of the sleeping house. She stumbled; he took her by the arm and did not let her go.

"Is this allowed on duty?" she asked with a touch of mockery.

It's almost peacetime now! thought Lubentsov. It must be the first time I've been out walking with a woman for four years!

The sky cleared, and the moon peeped out from behind the broken clouds. Its light fell on the white walls of the houses timbered with horizontal black beams and on the sharp-pointed roof of the church. How could they help remembering the woods near Vyazma where they had been hiding three years ago.

"I have a kind of feeling," he said, "as if we had been climbing for a long time up a high and steep mountain and now at last we are at the very summit or near it.... Perhaps it's a hackneyed enough comparison, but... how far you can see from this peak! You begin to see the past in a new way and what lies ahead grows so crystal clear.... Now we really know our strength and our meaning in the world. We have grown up. It's

as if we had reached maturity . . ." he gave an embarrassed smile. "Well, it's difficult to explain."

She looked at him attentively, simply to make sure that he was really that same Lieutenant who had stood at her side on a cold autumn night on the old Smolensk road; he from whom one might learn to be confident and brave. She suddenly envied his scouts and everyone who had to do with him.

"Do you hear that?" he asked unexpectedly.

They looked at each other in surprise: strange moaning sounds were coming from somewhere nearby, just as if the wind were playing on gigantic strings. It was an old tune they had known since childhood. Someone was playing the famous song about Stepan Razin on an instrument they could not recognize. The sounds were coming from the church. Lubentsov and Tanya made their way towards it and soon found themselves before the broad steps. They went in. The moonlight poured through the narrow vaulted windows. In the radiance of this light on a high balustrade sat a sergeant playing the organ. Below a group of soldiers stood listening.

The music stopped and the Sergeant rose from his seat.

"Comrade Major, may I continue?" he asked in a ringing voice.

Lubentsov, spellbound, did not at first understand that he was being addressed. When he did, he just waved his hand. Then he and Tanya left the church.

The street was cold, windy and solemn.

Slowly they walked back to the house. Suddenly Lubentsov asked:

"And your husband . . . what front is he on?"

"He was killed," Tanya replied. "In '42," and added dryly, "On the Stalingrad front."

The sudden flatness in her voice meant: Please don't be sorry for me, don't waste words and don't pretend that you are interested in my husband.

"That's how it is," she said in a casual voice.

But then she glanced at Lubentsov and catching sight of his disconcerted embarrassed face, could not restrain herself. In vain she bit her lower lip—it was already too late: tears flowed from her eyes and she turned aside, hardly able to keep from sobbing.

III

Early the next morning a column of lorries drove into the village. One of the lorries stopped suddenly and out jumped a young signaller, Lieutenant Nikolsky. His first concern was to inform Lubentsov joyfully:

"Do you know what, Comrade Major, we are already on German territory!"

"I know," said Lubentsov with a laugh and turned to Tanya. It was time to go, but they lingered.

Ginger, the Siberian, came out of the house. He had only just woken up. Seeing that the Major was about to leave, he said:

"Good luck, Comrade Major. See you in Berlin."

"It looks like it," laughed Lubentsov and gripped the big soldier's hand.

With the same energy he gripped Tanya's slender fingers. She winced with pain and said plaintively:

"How can you? I have to operate on wounded men with this hand...."

Lubentsov was crushed. Cursing himself mentally for his clumsiness he climbed in beside the driver. The Lieutenant jumped up into the back, and they set off.

I am a bear! thought Lubentsov ruefully. Didn't say a word to her, did not wish the others luck.... What will she think of me!

He sighed. The driver glanced sideways at him and smiled understandingly. These scouts, they find time for

everything. Everyone in the division knew Lubentsov. His cunning and daring were almost a legend. Naturally, both the driver and Lieutenant Nikolsky decided that the Guards Major was not just out for a morning walk with this beautiful grey-eyed doctor.

Meanwhile the lorry had come out on to the main road. Joining the endless column of other vehicles it slowed down.

As he watched the flat country, the snow-powdered tiled roofs, the small evenly-planted woods slide past the windows, and sub-consciously took stock of the terrain from the tactical point of view, Lubentsov did not, however, stop thinking of Tanya. He remembered her tears and the moving story that had followed. She had told him how her husband was killed and of her mother's death and remembering all this he felt himself smiling a dreamy, gentle and, as he immediately decided, a heartless smile. That means, he thought, I am glad that she has lost her husband?! I never thought myself so base!

He tried to put on a serious expression.

His meeting with Tanya, especially on a day that marked the approaching end of the war, struck him as profoundly significant.

Tanya was an "old acquaintance." This seemed very important to Lubentsov. Their relations were not to fall into the category of rash "friendship" not uncommon between man and woman at the front—"friendship" which sickened him and which he avoided.

"An old acquaintance!" The words had an unusually pleasant ring. They freed him from that feeling of shyness which he experienced in the presence of women one met sometimes who were all too well aware of what was expected of them.

He passed the whole time thinking of Tanya and of future meetings with her, until they reached a village where the division had stopped over for a few hours.

Here Lubentsov immediately plunged into an atmosphere familiar to him, the bustling but unhurried atmosphere of all headquarters.

The division scouts were quartered in a big white-washed house on the western outskirts of the village.

The house was full of white featherbeds and clocks of various sizes. The latter coughed out the hours so hoarsely they might have been asking to be let into the featherbeds.

Above the doors, over the beds and between the windows hung mottoes in verse, printed on cardboard in ancient Gothic ligature—most of them about the need to be satisfied with a little or about the advantages of quiet family happiness over worldly vanities. Beneath the verses hung photographs of two smiling German soldiers—apparently sons of the master of the house—with the streets and squares of European capitals in the background: Copenhagen, The Hague, Brussels and Paris. The sons had not been satisfied with a little!

In the army news spreads quickly: the scouts already knew of their chief's return. They came to welcome him and although they were reserved men and rarely showed their feelings, Lubentsov could not help but notice that they were glad to see him back.

Here they were: Sergeant-Major Voronin, a famous scout, dark, small, agile, with a cunning, fox-like face; sedate Senior Sergeant Mitrokhin, a man who knew his own worth; young Captain Meshchersky, reconnaissance company commander, and Sergeant Chibiryov, Lubentsov's reticent and eccentric orderly.

Always unshaven and avoiding every extra movement, the apathetic interpreter Oganesyán was sitting on one of the featherbeds. At the sight of Lubentsov, however, he jumped up promptly. The Guards Major appreciated this sacrifice and hastened to say "at

ease," whereupon the interpreter sank back with relief on to the featherbed.

"So you are not going to the academy?" asked Meshchersky shyly.

"No, not till after the war," said Lubentsov.

The questions began: What are they saying at Army Headquarters? What are the Germans doing on other sectors of the front?

They were all in an elevated, holiday mood. One of the scouts said, enthusiastically waving his arms:

"You've seen what's happening on the roads, Comrade Major? Something terrific! And the number of men! And guns too! Now the German is in a spin even though all of Europe worked for him."

"Got there at last," sighed Sergeant-Major Voronin contentedly and then added unexpectedly: "It means, Comrade Major of the Guards, that it's time to set to with the awl and hammer."

The idea of an awl and a cobbler's hammer in no way fitted in with Lubentsov's conception of Voronin, a scout of unsurpassed valour, decorated with five Orders. Lubentsov smiled and for the first time during the war thought of each soldier in the light of his past occupation.

So the "great" Voronin was a shoemaker, Mitrokhin—a smelter, Chibiryov worked on the Dnieper as a buoy-keeper, Oganessian, that unkempt, grumbling and kind-hearted man was an art critic, and Captain Meshchersky had not been anything yet. When the war broke out he had only just finished secondary school.

Only Lubentsov had been before the war what he was now, a regular army man.

"Now, friends," he said, hiding his emotion with a joke, "while you are still soldiers, tell me what's new in the division."

But at that moment the sour face of Major Antonyuk, Lubentsov's assistant, appeared in the doorway. He had never been a very cheerful character and now he was particularly gloomy. It was difficult for him to conceal his disappointment. He had hoped that his chief's departure to the academy would bring him, Antonyuk, a promotion.

Major Antonyuk knew the rules and regulations by heart, had been in the army for a long time and had excellent bearing. He was a former cavalryman and proud of it. Special courses on reconnaissance, he considered, had made him a great expert in this field, too.

His attitude towards Lubentsov was mixed. He did not, of course, shut his eyes to the Guards Major's high qualities. But those things which others considered Lubentsov's merits, he was inclined to regard as defects. Antonyuk deplored, for example, Lubentsov's informal and comradely manner with the scouts. Besides, he considered it quite improper for Lubentsov to be studying German with Oganesyanyan; it was not proper for a commanding officer to be instructed in anything whatsoever by a subordinate, as though he were a schoolboy. In general, he thought there was a lot of the "civilian" in Lubentsov, and "civilian" to Antonyuk was synonymous with "inferior." He had begun to treat Captain Meshchersky with downright contempt when he discovered that he wrote poetry on the quiet.

Lubentsov was aware of all this. Sometimes he merely laughed, now and then it angered him. But the Guards Major had only to raise his voice and Antonyuk immediately subsided. On the whole he respected only angry superiors. Lubentsov used to say of him:

"If you don't shout at him—he won't do anything. . . . And he thinks the same about others."

But now Lubentsov was too happy about the advance into Germany and the meeting with Tanya, to pay

attention to Antonyuk's long face. He attentively studied the map showing particulars of the enemy's defence works along the river Küddow. The scouts crowded around their chief, smoked makhorka contentedly and waited for orders. They knew one thing: the tireless Major would certainly find work for them! And indeed, after a few moments' thought, he stood up, paced the room and then said:

"Well! There's fighting to be done! I think we'll send a reconnaissance party forward to reconnoitre fortifications along the Küddow. This is part of the famous Eastern Wall, you know. Get the men ready, Meshchersky. You'll be in command. I'll go and report to the General." He turned to the interpreter: "Are there any prisoners?"

"There are."

"Have you questioned them?"

"Yes, a little."

"Asked them about the Küddow?"

"No," confessed the interpreter.

Lubentsov glanced reprovingly at Antonyuk but said nothing, put on his cap, and went off to the Divisional Commander.

IV

It was very noisy near the house where the Divisional Commander, Major-General Sereda, had his headquarters. Apparently some big chief had arrived; at the front gate stood a car and an armoured transport carrying a heavy-calibre machine gun. Staff officers with files kept running in and out of the house, very harassed and even a little scared. One of them whispered in Lubentsov's ear:

"Do you know who's here? Sizokrylov!"

The Divisional Commander's visitor was in fact a member of the Military Council, Lieutenant-General Geor-

gi Nikolayevich Sizokrylov. Lubentsov hesitated, then climbed the steps.

The entrance hall was full of people. Here were sitting Sizokrylov's liaison officers and adjutants, sub-machine gunners from his guard and officers summoned from Divisional Headquarters. It was quiet. Behind the door low voices could be heard.

No, it would not be the thing to call on the Divisional Commander now. Leaning against the doorpost, Lubentsov thought over the words of the report he would make should the member of the Military Council call in a scout.

The door flew open and the chief of the Political Department of the division, Colonel Plotnikov, appeared on the threshold.

"Send for Lubentsov," he said to one of the division's officers.

"I'm already here."

"Ah! Come in!"

It was very quiet in the large, semidark room. In the far corner, on the divan sat a spare, grey-haired man in a general's greatcoat. Opposite him the Divisional Commander, Major-General Sereda, was standing at attention. An unknown Major-General, a tankman, judging by the emblems on his shoulder tabs, and two colonels were standing at a distance.

Lubentsov wanted to report his arrival, but sensing that the atmosphere in the room was tense, and sympathizing wholeheartedly with his Divisional Commander who was undoubtedly receiving a dressing-down for something, he stood "at attention" by the wall.

The first word he heard was "carriage." He pricked up his ears in surprise.

"Yes, even in carriages," the member of the Military Council was saying. "They ride on anything you like. . . . Today I had to stop some kind of covered wagons, three of them, top-heavy with your infantry, Taras Petrovich."

He was silent for a moment, then said more softly and, as it seemed to Lubentsov, somewhat slyly: "And not only yours. . . ." He looked Sereda full in the face and said irritably: "Sit down, what are you standing for!"

General Taras Petrovich Sereda sat down, but Sizokrylov stood up and began talking, as he paced up and down the room:

"A successful and rapid advance is a good thing, but it's got its negative side. Overzealous commanders during the offensive often forget about discipline. There's a sort of devil-may-care attitude appearing among the troops—nothing worries us, we are such brave fellows. . . . On enemy territory that may lead to some very unpleasant excesses. You are all behaving as if you were drunk. Of course, you are thinking, we are in Germany. . . . But, Germany's got to be taken just as Velikiye Luki was taken. She must be fought for!"

Why have they called me? thought Lubentsov, repenting his, as it now appeared, reprehensible trip in the carriage. Surely they can't know that I was in that business too?

He studied the member of the Military Council whom he had not seen before but of whom he had heard much. He was struck by Sizokrylov's eyes: deep-set, clever, and very tired.

On being informed that the scout had arrived, Sizokrylov turned and measured him with a steady gaze. Can it be that he knows about the carriage? thought Lubentsov again, blushing slightly.

But everything was all right on that score.

"Can you find your way well in the dark?"

"Yes, Comrade General."

"Your Divisional Commander told me that you had been at the Headquarters of a tank formation recently. . . ."

"Yes, two days ago."

"You'll drive me there."

Lubentsov said worriedly:

"There may be stray groups of Germans between us and the tankmen. The front is not solid here. I can go myself, Comrade General, and bring someone from the tankmen here to report. I'll be back quickly."

Again Sizokrylov looked steadily at the scout and answered somewhat mockingly:

"I should obey you with pleasure, Comrade Major, but the trouble is that I want to visit the tank units personally."

Lubentsov was overcome with embarrassment and said:

"I understand, Comrade General."

"As for the stray groups of Germans or these 'Werwölfe'," continued Sizokrylov, "I don't think we need to fear them. The Germans like to be given orders. They won't act on their own initiative. And the cleverer ones know it's no use. Have you a lot to do?"

"Only to have the reconnaissance plan approved and question prisoners."

"Will you be through in an hour?"

"I will."

"You have an hour at your disposal," the General glanced at his watch and turned suddenly to the Divisional Commander: "And where's your daughter? Surely she's not still here with you?"

General Sereda's thirteen-year-old daughter Vika was with him almost all the time. Her mother had been killed by a German bomb early in the war.

Brought up among soldiers in the midst of battles and the adversities of war, she had acquired a good understanding of maps and of various kinds of weapons. As her father jokingly remarked, she had learnt to read out of "Infantry Field Manual, part one."

The General had kept up an endless correspondence with his sister-in-law. When they had at last reached agreement on everything, the offensive on the Vistula had begun. There was no time then for personal affairs and Vika remained, as before, in the division.

She was a strange girl, very clever and not very strong. She had a wonderful memory and would quite often prompt her father about the names of localities, the numbers of strategic heights and details of the division's artillery and other units. Sometimes when staff officers, in conversation with the Divisional Commander, could not remember the name of a locality where the division had been stationed the year before, Vika's soft little voice would be heard from the corner of the room saying, not without a comic complacency:

"Daddy, that was on the western fringe of the forest, two kilometres south of Zadyba."

But knowing all these things which were quite useless to her, she had no idea of the normal interests of girls of her age.

Of course, such an unusual case could not pass unnoticed, and no wonder that the member of the Military Council was aware of Vika's existence.

"Bring her in," said Sizokrylov.

The Divisional Commander went out silently into another room and called Vika.

In came a pale, wide-eyed girl with black hair cropped like a boy's, wearing a khaki skirt and tunic. She was quiet, serious and deliberately calm, but Sizokrylov noticed small signs that showed how nervous she really was. Her thin left shoulder had a slight twitch. She came up to the member of the Military Council and introduced herself:

"I am Vika."

Noticing Lubentsov she gave him a friendly smile. This was not lost on the member of the Military

Council, who gathered that the scout was a general favourite.

While Lubentsov in the next room was reporting his plan of reconnaissance to the division's Chief of Staff, General Sizokrylov started a conversation with Vika. Using the respectful form of address as if she were a grownup, he said:

"It's time you went to Moscow to study. The war is coming to an end and one must think of the future."

"I want to wait till Berlin is taken, Comrade General," answered Vika seriously. "It'll be so interesting there!"

"All the same, you ought to leave this place."

"But I am studying here; Major Garin and Lieutenant Nikolsky teach me a bit."

"A bit?" retorted the General. "A bit—that's too little."

"I understand," Vika agreed, confused. "But it's only for the time being."

"And don't you hinder your father in combat?" asked Sizokrylov, with a sidelong glance at the Divisional Commander.

"On the contrary," answered Vika, "I help him." She smiled mournfully at no one in particular. "When he forgets something, I remind him."

Everyone laughed except Sizokrylov.

"Well, that's good. But all the same, please prepare to leave immediately for the second echelon! You see, in the present war of movement Divisional Headquarters often gets into a difficult situation. . . . Anything can happen, like the time when you and your father ran into the Germans. Isn't that so?"

"Yes, on the outskirts of Szubin."

"There, you see."

General Sereda, with an embarrassed smile, said:

"Do you understand, Vika? Nothing can be done about it, the Military Council's order must be obeyed."

Meanwhile Lubentsov had his plan for reconnaissance approved and went back to his unit. He gave Antonyuk the necessary instructions and set off together with Oganessian and Chibiryov to the barn where the prisoners were being kept.

The prisoners were sitting on the straw, eating soup out of messtins. While waiting for them to finish their supper, Lubentsov began talking to his orderly in an undertone:

"How are you getting on? Are the horses all right?"

"Quite all right," answered Chibiryov.

His square face was, as always, calm and impassive. But Lubentsov knew his orderly well enough to notice that something was bothering him. Finally, Chibiryov said:

"They were all saying it was the Germans' bellies that let them down. But I've noticed there's a devil of a lot of cows and pigs round here. How do you explain that?"

Lubentsov looked at him with interest. Questions that worried Chibiryov apparently worried all the other scouts. Indeed, the German farmyards were well stocked with pigs and thoroughbred black and white cows.

"It's not as simple as that," answered Lubentsov after thinking for a moment. "While pigs are running about in the daylight, you can't eat them, and the Germans were not allowed to slaughter them. A prisoner on the Bug told me that. . . . Well, that's how it is: you look around, there's food, but look deeper and it's not food but army stores."

Chibiryov stopped to think, weighing the force of the argument. Then he said:

"Seems it was like that. So the Germans could have gone on fighting for about another ten years. They would have had enough grub and everything. . . . That means, it

wasn't hunger that beat them nor the American bombs. It was us."

Chibiryov had certainly found the root of the matter and Lubentsov smiled gratefully at him.

Lubentsov loved his orderly, in spite of his eccentricities. Chibiryov spoke rather scornfully about people, with the air of an infallible judge and it was not at all easy to win praise from this taciturn, thoughtful soldier.

Of Lubentsov he would say:

"That's a man."

Of Antonyuk whom he did not like and in his heart did not respect, he spoke just as shortly:

"That's not a man."

The scouts sometimes laughed at him, asking now about one, now about another person:

"What do you think, Chibiryov, is that a man or not a man?"

True, it was rather dangerous to laugh at him. When angry, he displayed a savage temper.

Oganesyan began to call out the prisoners one by one.

Lubentsov was immediately and forcibly struck by two interesting features about them. First, the Germans belonged to various front-line formations and to rear garrisons. Regular, special, reserve and security units were all mixed up, reflecting the demoralization and panic reigning in the German army. Secondly, during the few hours since their capture the Germans had already lost their military bearing and turned into what they had been before the war, petty officials, shopkeepers, artisans, workers and peasants. In this they differed radically from earlier prisoners. Those had remained soldiers even after capture.

Apparently the new prisoners fully realized that Germany was defeated. Not all of them, though. An

Oberfeldwebel of the routed 25th Infantry Division, Helmut Schwalbe, flashing his small mad eyes gloomily, answered the question about the prospects of the war thus:

"In the dark mine shafts," he said prophetically, raising a dirty finger, "a secret weapon of immense power is being forged . . . it will save Germany."

An emaciated German, standing behind this Schwalbe said contemptuously and angrily:

"Er ist ja verrückt, aber total verrückt, dieser Esel!"*

Subdued quarrelling began among the prisoners, apparently not for the first time. Lubentsov noted with satisfaction that Schwalbe was isolated and that the majority of the prisoners laughed at him, while the rest kept dejectedly silent.

Most of what the prisoners knew about the fortifications on the river Küddow was hearsay. However, Lubentsov noted down carefully even these small scraps of information.

The hour which the member of the Military Council had allowed was running out. The Major left Oganessian in the barn to continue the interrogation, and taking his orderly with him, went to the Divisional Commander.

Here, the bustle of departure was already afoot. The sub-machine gunners were hurriedly taking their places on the benches in the armoured troop carrier. They moved up to make room for Chibiryov.

Sizokrylov came out of the house. Looking about him and catching sight of the scout, he nodded to him, then took his leave of Sereda and Plotnikov and went to the car.

"Let's go," he said.

Lubentsov sat beside the driver; the member of the Military Council with his aide, the Colonel and the Tank-General took their places at the back.

* He has gone right out of his mind, the old ass!

The car sped along the asphalted road, swaying gently. Rounding a bend in the road, it caught up with a carriage, crawling along slowly, harnessed behind four horses.

Lubentsov shot a furtive glance at the member of the Military Council. The General's eyes were closed. The car overtook the ill-starred carriage. Lubentsov was ready to swear it was that same contraption of Chokhov's. But he could not distinguish it clearly; the car flashed past too quickly, and dusk was beginning to fall.

V

It was indeed that same carriage. Of its passengers there now remained only Captain Chokhov and Ginger, the Siberian, who had planted himself on the coach box as coachman. Their fellow travellers had dispersed to their own units that morning.

Chokhov sat back, smoking grimly. He had noticed Lubentsov in the huge car and was thinking of him with indefinable irritation: That Major again. . . . The preacher type. . . . We know that sort. . . . He could not forgive Lubentsov his contemptuous gesture and biting words, and in the presence of a woman, too! The darling, he thought, surely some hero of the rear . . . laughs all the time . . . saves Germans . . . the sucker.

The regiment for which Chokhov was heading was already close by. The Headquarters village appeared round the next bend.

"Faster," shouted Chokhov.

Ginger lashed the horses with his whip.

The Regimental Headquarters occupied a long house with a tiled gabled roof. In front of the house grew three old and gnarled oak trees. Leaving the carriage by the oak trees, Chokhov proceeded with a brisk step past the

sentry ignoring his surprise at the sight of the strange conveyance, and, pushing his way through the orderlies, messengers and clerks who were sitting and standing about in the entrance, he entered a small room. A very short Major was speaking on the telephone. At the table sat a clerk and a telephone operator. Chokhov saluted jauntily:

"Captain Chokhov, at your service."

"... Look here, Veselchakov," shouted the Major into the telephone receiver, "take the village! What do you mean—they're shooting?... Did you expect 'em to come out and meet you with a band?" Putting down the receiver, the Major said to the telephone operator:

"Get me 'Lily'... Let's find out how that sweet white flower is doing over there."

Then he turned to Chokhov, took his documents and asked:

"Well?"

Funny fellow, thought Chokhov, can he really be the Chief of Staff.

"To be a company commander?" asked the Major.

"Correct."

"Been at that job for long?"

"Two years."

"Longish spell," said the Major and, waving at the telephone operator to keep quiet with his "Lily," he asked: "Why so?"

Chokhov stared at the Major with his impenetrable, grey eyes like a deep-sea diver staring out of his diving suit at an underwater plant.

"I don't know," he said.

The Major grinned.

"Well, well? Who does know?"

"The higher-ups," said Chokhov.

The Major grunted and went out into the other room.

"Who's that?" Chokhov asked the clerk peremptorily.

"The Regimental Commander."

"Well, not a bad chap?"

"Who? Comrade Major?" the clerk was surprised at such a familiar attitude towards the Chief of Staff, "Hero of the Soviet Union, Major Migayev. Not bad. . . "

The Major returned, spoke at last to the elusive "Lily," the white flower, then turned to the clerk:

"Put Captain Chokhov on the list as commander of the second rifle company. And what's that contraption?" He suddenly became interested in the carriage standing outside the window.

"That's mine," said Chokhov.

Migayev burst out laughing.

"Oh it's you who's the count! I see! Well, you can leave your wheelbarrow behind! We're giving you an infantry company not a motorized one. . . . And remember this—we need a battalion commander. If you're the man—we'll make you a battalion commander."

"I'm all right where I am," said Chokhov.

"Get off with you, you strange fellow!" the Major pretended to be angry.

"All right," answered Chokhov in a melancholy voice and turned round, having once again raised his hand to his cap with dashing carelessness.

When he had already opened the door, Major Migayev shouted after him:

"Do you know where the Second Company is?"

"I'll find it," said Chokhov shortly and went out.

Chokhov came from Novgorod. He had lost his father early and had grown up with his old mother in a cottage on the outskirts of the town. His elder brother worked in a factory in Leningrad. When the war began Chokhov was nineteen years old, he had just finished the teachers' training school and was in love with the

girl next door, Varya Prokhorova, a fair, bright-eyed girl who had studied with him and who was to start teaching in 1941, at the beginning of the school year. Chokhov was preparing to go to his brother in Leningrad to enter an institute there.

The war shattered all these plans. Chokhov boarded up the windows of his cottage, said good-bye to Varya and went to the station accompanied by his mother.

In Leningrad, Chokhov was immediately called up to the army. Varya wrote to him every day, until the Germans seized Novgorod and the letters stopped. Chokhov's unit was sent to the Karelian front. Continual fighting developed in which Chokhov from the first distinguished himself by his coolheadedness and courage. Soon he was sent to a junior lieutenants' school. He did not, in fact, study for long, because the trainees were sent into battle on the Murmansk front, but Chokhov was nevertheless given officer's rank and took command of a platoon. He was seriously wounded. A year later, when fighting on the Northwestern front, he learnt from the newspapers that schoolteacher Varvara Prokhorova, a partisan scout, had been hanged by the Germans on Lenin Street in Novgorod.

Later he received news from Leningrad that his old mother had died of starvation during the winter. Not even a grave remained, for she died in the street and was buried by strangers. His elder brother was killed when a German shell hit his workshop.

Out of the whole family Chokhov alone was left.

These blows struck the young man hard, and embittered him. The war became his entire life's interest, its chief meaning. He thought of nothing and spoke of nothing but the war. As time passed he began to feel almost proud of the fact that he was alone in the world. What's it to me? I am alone. He thought this often. When the soldiers received letters from home or talked about their

families with emotion, smiles, sighs or complaints, Chokhov looked down upon them as if these family ties lowered them and made them inferior.

In battle he distinguished himself by his boundless courage. His hatred of the Germans—including prisoners—became proverbial. His superiors forgave him much because of his bravery and, knowing of the misfortunes that had befallen him, were secretly sorry for him. Nonetheless, they were forced to treat the Captain with caution; sometimes he was too reckless! Breaking all the rules he always went ahead of his soldiers, although in doing so he quite often lost control of his company.

For these reasons Chokhov still remained a company commander. Although he pretended that this was of no consequence to him, in his heart he felt deeply hurt. And this time too, when he left Major Migayev and made his way towards his carriage, his face was gloomy.

There was already a gathering of soldiers around the carriage. They were examining it with surprise and some amusement. Ginger was explaining the details he had heard yesterday from Lubentsov about the construction of the ancient vehicle. The Latin motto he translated as: "For the faith, the tsar and the fatherland."

Discovering that Chokhov was moving further on, Ginger, whose division was stationed to the left, repeated what he had said recently to Lubentsov:

"Shall we meet in Berlin?"

"Better stay alive first," said Chokhov.

Ginger threw his kit bag onto his shoulder and went off "to stay alive."

"Anybody for the First Battalion?" Chokhov asked the soldiers.

There were some. A messenger from the Battalion Headquarters turned up and with him a regimental signaller. They climbed into the carriage and bounced

cheerfully on the soft, satin seats. The heraldic stag on the half-closed door seemed to buck with fright at the sight of the foreign soldiers arriving in the fatherland as victors over the famous Pomeranian grenadiers of Frederick the Great.

Major Veselchakov, Commander of the First Battalion, was quartered in the last house in another village. He already knew of the arrival of the new company commander. Migayev had phoned him. Perhaps Migayev had also hinted at certain peculiarities in the character of the dashing captain. In any case the Battalion Commander said nothing about the carriage, which he had spotted from afar.

Veselchakov was a tall, pock-marked, rather clumsy man. He dressed, however, with exceptional neatness: a clean white collar, brightly shining boots.

The explanation lay in his marriage. While still in the carriage Chokhov had heard from the messenger about Glasha, the Battalion Commander's wife.

Glasha was justly called the mother of the First Battalion. She was a nurse. Cleanliness was a mania with her but behind it there was something deeper for which the soldiers could not find a name.

After Veselchakov's marriage to Glasha he ran into a number of difficulties. The question of Glasha and Veselchakov had already been discussed at a meeting of the regimental Party bureau. In wartime, especially in a rifle battalion, one was not supposed to start a family. However, for Veselchakov and Glasha an exception was made.

When he came down to investigate the case the Political Department instructor, Major Garin, could not make up his mind to separate them for the simple reason that the Battalion Commander and Glasha really loved each other. That was obvious to everybody, every soldier in the battalion knew it.

Garin had a talk with Veselchakov's political assistant and with the Party organizer. It was a clear case: laxity could not be permitted among officers. War is war. Glasha and the Battalion Commander had to be separated. But Garin felt something was not right in that. This was not "campaign" love, this was simply love. After sitting up the whole night pondering over the results of his investigation, he did not write anything and went back to the Political Department of the division. Garin decided that with the beginning of the offensive this business would be forgotten. And so it had gone on until the present time.

Although Glasha was not in the room at the moment, the feminine touch could be felt everywhere in the cleanliness and tidiness surrounding the Battalion Commander. Soon Glasha herself appeared.

She was a big, very stout woman, about twenty-seven years old with plump legs and straight flaxen hair. She was slightly pock-marked like Veselchakov himself and had firm ruddy cheeks.

But when you looked into the eyes of this huge woman you were amazed by an expression of rare kindness. A glance at her tiny mouth, at the dimples in her ruddy cheeks, was enough to make one forget her lack of gracefulness. Here there was a hint of something more valuable than physical beauty—a beautiful soul.

Chokhov too sensed this faintly.

Glasha began bustling about with food for the new officer, recounting to him, as if to an old acquaintance, that here at the German chemist's, where she had been rummaging for half the day, there were good medicines and quite a store of bandages. This pleased her very much because the Medical Battalion was a long way behind the forward units.

"They live cleanly," she said of the Germans, "only what soul they have is obviously not very clean. They

are very scared of us! The cat knows whose meat he's been eating."

The battalion had just taken a large village and seized two German tanks in good repair and ten motor lorries. These vehicles stood near the Battalion Commander's house. The Germans had retired into a small wood on some high ground and opened fire with their mortars. Every five minutes the air resounded with a hoarse explosion. Mines burst in the fields now to the right, now to the left. After each explosion Veselchakov grumbled softly, threatening the invisible enemy:

"Just wait . . . you'll change your tune in the morning."

"Shouldn't we knock them out of there," said Chokhov half questioningly.

"Our men are tired," answered Veselchakov, "they haven't slept for three days. . . . Give them a rest. You can go to your unit. It's in the village, over there, across the stream. On the north boundary. They'll show you. You haven't got many men, the platoon commanders have all been put out of action. On the other hand there's a battery of anti-tank guns and a mortar battery. You have enough fire power."

"Make sure that the men take off their boots for the night," Glasha said to Chokhov in farewell. "And it would be a good thing for them to go to the bathhouse." She looked pleadingly at Veselchakov.

"There you go again with that bathhouse of yours!" Veselchakov shook his head. "The men need sleep, not steaming."

Chokhov set off.

He gave the baronial horses a smart cut with the whip and they crossed the stream at a lively trot. The water was up to the horses' bellies and wetted the satin seats of the coach.

Just on the outskirts of the village near the ruined

bridge over the stream lay a dead Russian soldier. He was spattered with foreign soil, and lay there in his grey greatcoat, his eyes fixed on the alien sky.

It was the first dead Russian soldier that Chokhov had seen in Germany. What a tragic fate: to have endured the battles and hardships of so many roads and to be killed when the goal was almost reached! Like any young man, Chokhov thought immediately of himself, of how, perhaps, he, too, would meet the same fate.

VI

The German defences on the Vistula had been of unparalleled strength. Anyone who has been to war knows what a rifle company is like after breaking through such defences. Afterwards, in pursuit of the enemy, the company no longer loses many men; only occasionally someone is killed or wounded or somebody falls ill. But the number of men grows less and less, and the company's task remains the same, even though it was originally designed for a full complement of soldiers. Each man now does the fighting of six. No one lags behind or falls ill. It is difficult to kill or wound one of them. They are immortal.

That does not mean that the surviving soldiers are the best. Once they *were* the same as those who fought at their side, and who fell from the ranks. But enriched with the valuable experience of war, they have *become* the best.

The Second Company consisted of twenty such "immortals." Its numerical weakness was due to other special circumstances as well. During the break-through the regiment had attacked on the extreme right flank of the front, although the soldiers had, of course, no idea of this. On crossing the river the troops of the adjoining front

had immediately turned towards the north. Thus the regiment, including the Second Company, advanced with their right flank exposed. They were bombarded from the fortified region of Modlin and at the same time suffered losses from the fire of the enemy forces retreating before them.

Though this was not Chokhov's first day in combat, he was shaken by the numerical weakness of the company entrusted to him. They've made me commander of a section! he thought, in a fit of temper.

The soldiers stared with unconcealed interest at their new commander who had swept so boldly across the stream in his remarkable conveyance. They were impressed by his decisive manner, cold grey eyes and complete self-assurance.

"Where are the platoon commanders?" he asked the soldiers who were lined up before him, as if he knew nothing of the state of the company.

A tall Sergeant-Major saluted and answered without hesitation:

"There aren't any, Comrade Captain. There's me, that is the Sergeant-Major, and two section commanders: Senior Sergeant Slivenko and Sergeant Gogoberidze. The last platoon commander, Junior Lieutenant Barsuk, was wounded in the fighting for Bromberg. Corporal Semiglav is carrying out the duties of quartermaster clerk. The Party organizer of the company is Senior Sergeant Slivenko. Company Sergeant-Major Godunov reporting."

"Take your boots off," commanded Chokhov dryly, "and get some sleep."

But not everybody went to sleep. Twenty-year-old Corporal Semiglav, under the influence of the great event, the entry into Germany, was quite unable to fall asleep.

Yesterday evening the Party organizer Slivenko had conducted a short but stirring soldiers' meeting on this

subject and Semiglav was greatly excited. Accordingly he busied himself for a long time in a repair shop on the edge of the village. He found a file there and set to work. Coming out of the workshop he sighed, looked reproachfully at his hands and said to the Party organizer:

"Lost the knack entirely. . . . What sort of mechanic am I now? They would not even give me a third class."

"You'll find it again," Slivenko answered consolingly. "You weren't much of a soldier in the beginning and see what a lion you are now! And you are far more used to a mechanic's job!"

But Semiglav was hurt; his hands just would not obey him. He wandered sadly round the village, glancing into houses. He looked up the artillerymen and the mortar gunners and told them about the new company commander. In one of the deserted houses he discovered a new SS tunic with an Iron Cross on it and, returning to his company, reported his find to the Captain.

"Burn that house down," said Chokhov.

The Party organizer, Slivenko, raised his eyebrows in surprise and answered calmly:

"Burn it down now and you'll light up the village. The Germans will thank you for that."

"What, scared of the Germans?" asked Chokhov darkly, but he did not persist.

The artillerymen to whom Semiglav had given the news, the commander of the anti-tank guns and a lieutenant on mortars, called in. They informed the new commander of the state of their outfits as they called their sections in the generally-accepted army jargon. There was a shortage of ammunition—half the regulation supply in all; the rear was a long way back but fresh supplies had been promised in the morning.

The village was bathed in moonlight. Most of the company were sleeping. Only the sentries in the trenches on the far side of the village were sitting up—some by a

machine gun, others at an anti-tank gun—peering at the dim outlines of trees and bushes and hiding huge twists of makhorka in the sleeves of their greatcoats. The guns only occasionally answered the German mortar fire: they were saving ammunition.

Having seen the artillerymen off, Chokhov got into the bed prepared for him by the Sergeant-Major. A few men, gathered in the yard, began quietly exchanging opinions about the new commander.

"Seems very decisive," said Gogoberidze, a tall, swarthy man with a little black up-turned moustache.

"Reckless!" added Semiglav.

Everybody's eyes turned on Slivenko; the Party organizer's opinion carried great weight with them. But Slivenko avoided making a hasty judgment, and said:

"Time will show."

In view of the commander's arrival, Godunov decided to arrange a slap-up supper. Up at the battalion he had succeeded in drawing vodka for the thirty men enrolled in the company's hut a week ago. Catching sight of some hens in a barn, left behind by their fleeing owners, the Sergeant-Major ordered private Pichugin:

"Catch three and fry them but don't go shooting 'em or you'll wake up our Captain." (He was already calling the Captain "our Captain," which meant he had accepted him as one of the company's family.)

When the chickens were ready, Godunov went to wake up Chokhov:

"Comrade Captain, supper's ready."

Chokhov jumped up immediately and began pulling on his boots. Realizing why he had been awakened he kicked off his boots again, and was about to refuse but, catching sight of the fried chicken and vodka in the cutglass decanter—the Sergeant-Major understood that kind of thing!—he remembered that he had eaten nothing all day and sat down to supper.

The soldiers' snoring came from behind the wall. Steps resounded along the village street mingled with the shouts of the guard. The village was full of signallers, sappers and medical orderlies. A rumble of vehicles was heard: that would be the ammo from regimental stores.

Three division scouts quartered in the next house came in. They had just been relieved from their observation post in an attic on the edge of the village. They sat down to warm themselves at the fire.

There was a knock at the door. Another group of division scouts arrived with their Company Commander, Captain Meshchersky, at their head. The captains introduced themselves. Having listened to the news from the scouts who had been observing the Germans, Meshchersky said to them:

"You know, fellows, the Guards Major has come back," and explained to Chokhov politely: "That's our reconnaissance chief. They wanted to send him to the academy but he wasn't having any."

Rather a polite, bookish type this reconnaissance captain. Chokhov, who thought politeness a superfluous luxury at the front, put up with the unusual habit from Meshchersky because he was a scout and Chokhov respected scouts.

When they had warmed themselves, Meshchersky and his men got up. On learning that the group was going into the German rear, Chokhov asked Meshchersky:

"Are you going with them?"

"Certainly," said Meshchersky.

Chokhov went out on to the porch and watched the scouts moving off until they were out of sight. Senior Sergeant Slivenko was standing by the porch.

"What are you doing—on guard?" asked Chokhov.

"No, Comrade Captain, just can't sleep." Slivenko was quiet for a moment, then said: "My daughter is here, Comrade Captain."

"Where?"

"Who knows! . . . In Germany. They brought her here. As soon as the Political Department gave it out we were in Germany there was no sleep for me." He gave a short laugh as if excusing himself for his weakness. "I've got it into my foolish old head that perhaps my daughter is half a mile away from me, somewhere nearby in one of these manor houses or in the next village."

"Germany is a big place," said Chokhov.

"I know that myself but I can't sleep, all the same. Today one German told me that there are Russian girls working in the next manor. For a landowner. It's a straight road there. Let me go and see, Comrade Captain, just to put my mind at rest."

They went inside and Chokhov looked at the map. The manor in question was two kilometres to the northeast.

"What's to be done?" said Chokhov. "You can't go alone and as for giving you men—there are few enough in the company as it is. . . . They say the Germans are operating in groups, something like partisans. . . ."

Slivenko laughed contemptuously.

"Come off it, Comrade Captain! I'll never believe that they have partisans. The Germans wouldn't go in for that kind of thing. The German—he's careful, he knows you can't chop wood with a penknife. And where is there to be a partisan here? The woods are clean and neat, the roads are straight. . . . No, you needn't worry about me, I'll go alone. . . ."

Chokhov was impressed by these apparently well thought-out arguments. After some hesitation he allowed the Party organizer to leave.

Slivenko took a sub-machine gun, put a grenade in each pocket and said, smiling in embarrassment:

"Thanks, Comrade Captain. You needn't even tell them . . ." he waved his hand at the door of the next room

where the soldiers were sleeping. "I'll be back in an hour," and he finished in Ukrainian: "—or else it'll look daft; Party organizer and such an old fool!"

He saluted and went out.

Chokhov was about to lie down when the door suddenly burst open and Captain Meshchersky rushed into the house. He was all covered with dirt and clay.

"Where's your telephone?" he asked. "I've got to send important news to Headquarters. The enemy is retiring. I crawled right up to their lines. They are retiring. I tell you definitely."

They rang up Battalion Headquarters which sent on the news to the regiment and the division.

The division stirred sleepily.

Chokhov woke up his men. They could scarcely move from fatigue and shivered in the cold of the dawn.

"Are you going now," Chokhov asked Meshchersky.

"Yes, they are waiting for me. Good-bye, Comrade Captain."

Chokhov was again surprised by the invariable politeness of the scout. Going out into the courtyard Chokhov stood for a while, listening to the receding footsteps of Meshchersky. Then he turned to his company which was fully assembled.

The soldiers left the courtyard. The village was already full of men, wagons and lorries. The lorries rumbled forward, the cars hooted, the men's messkins rattled.

VII

The further Slivenko went along the edge of the asphalted road, treading loudly with his iron-tipped heels, the more probable it seemed to him that this was the manor where he would find his daughter or *dauchkú*, as he called her in Ukrainian. True, in the very depths of

his mind, as if on a tiny island, there sat Slivenko, the sceptic, scoffing away at Slivenko, the dreamer, to whom everything seemed possible.

Well, you are a queer cove, Slivenko, Slivenko-the-sceptic told him, grinning sarcastically, you can't seriously believe that Galya is right here in this particular manor house? Over forty years old, a miner, a man who knows life, and you suddenly start believing you'll find your daughter just like that in this enemy country with all its thousands of manor houses and villages.... Go back to your own lads and go to bed....

But Slivenko walked on stubbornly. He remembered his Galya. When the Germans had come she was sixteen. At school she had just finished the seventh class. She was a tall, dark, good-looking girl. But dearest of all to her father was her mind: subtle, slightly mocking, concealed in public behind a modest reticence befitting her years. Slivenko loved talking to his daughter, and was always discovering new qualities in her: an understanding of human nature, a strong will and exceptional capabilities. True, he tried not to indulge his paternal feelings and was rather strict with her.

Slivenko remembered with repentance what now seemed to him his unjust fault-finding. It had been foolish to make such a fuss over her childish affair with Volodka Okhrimchuk, a wonderful, merry lad who had been killed in the war.

When the war came to the Donbas, Slivenko joined a Communist battalion which was thrown against the Germans at Stalino. Slivenko had been wounded in this battle and carried off at night in a ramshackle lorry to the military hospital.

Of course, when he had recovered, he could have said that he was a coal miner. That would probably have kept him out of the army. Miners were needed in the rear, at Karaganda for instance. Slivenko did not actually conceal

his trade. He simply did not mention it. He thought, in his ignorance of war, that by doing this he would certainly be sent just where he yearned to be—to Voroshilovgrad. He would be driving the Germans out of his beloved Donbas. But he was disillusioned; he was assigned to an anti-aircraft unit at some distant *stanitsa** where there were petrol stores. At night Slivenko would look longingly into the limitless autumn sky stretching over the steppe and his heart yearned for the west, for his native coal mine, for his own little house. He became appeased, however, when he realized that while everyone had his own native home, everybody was fighting for their native land as a whole and by so doing for each and every home in it.

The day came when the Donbas was liberated and Slivenko, after his second wound (by then he was already in the infantry), managed to visit his native mine. He crossed the threshold of his house and stood for a long time in the middle of the room embracing his "old woman." He did not understand her bitter tears and yet he guessed at the cause of them. He did not dare ask what the matter was and at the same time he knew that it was connected with Galya, who was not in the house. The house seemed empty and useless.

Finally, when the neighbours came running in and he learned of Galya's fate, he began to comfort the "old woman" and, of course, promised her, smiling uncertainly, that just as soon as he arrived in Germany he would find their *dauchkú*. And though the "old woman" did not believe this, she did not say anything, but just wept quietly.

And now he was in Germany. And alive! And there, a kilometre away from him, was his daughter.

He quickened his pace.

* A Cossack village.

Then he had a sad thought which he always strove to drive out of his mind: My daughter, she's beautiful. What man would not take a look at her? Who wouldn't smile at her sweetly? And if such a girl were a slave? And the Germans—the masters?...

The manor appeared. It was a large house, surrounded by a thick stone wall, like a fortress. The little vaulted gateways were also like those of a fortress. The gates were of heavy beams with iron crossbars, the wicket gate was shut fast.

Slivenko kicked the gates with his iron-tipped boot and shouted:

"Open!"

A dog barked fiercely and angrily.

Hurried footsteps resounded. They stopped at the wicket gate, then began to go away. Then Slivenko struck the wicket gate with the butt of his rifle:

"Open the door!... There's a Russian soldier here!"

The steps hurried faster. There was already more than one man there. At last a German voice at the wicket gate asked timorously:

"Was wünschen Sie?"*

"Vinshenzi, vinshenzi, open up, I say!"

The wicket gate opened.

In front of Slivenko there stood an old, sickly looking German with a lantern in his hand. At a little distance two shadows crouched against the stable door. They suddenly raised their hands and came slowly towards Slivenko. He saw that they were German soldiers.

"Kaput," they said.

"Certainly it's kaput," said Slivenko.

To be on the safe side he resorted to a soldier's cunning—"Wait a minute, boys!" he shouted into the silent night beyond the gates.

* What do you want?

But he did this perhaps more to clear his conscience as a soldier, than from a desire to convince the Germans.

"Only zwei?" he asked, prodding each soldier in turn with his finger.

"Zwei, zwei, nur zwei," mumbled the old man.

"About turn!" ordered Slivenko, holding his sub-machine gun at the ready.

The Germans understood, turned round and walked across the broad courtyard, heaped with manure and straw, and crowded with big high-boarded carts.

They went into the master's house. In the vestibule Slivenko shouted "Halt!"

"Where guns?" he asked clapping his hand on to the butt of his sub-machine gun. "These, guns, where are they?"

"Nic nie ma," answered one of the soldiers in Polish.

"Nix Waffen," answered the other, "weggeschmissen," he explained with his arm, as if throwing something.

"Thrown them away . . ." translated Slivenko.

Perhaps the best way out would have been to lay out these two lanky, red-haired Germans with a good burst from the sub-machine gun. But Slivenko could not have acted like that—not from fear of the authorities, who forbade such kind of violence, no one would ever get to know about it anyway. No, Slivenko simply could not have acted like that, it was not within his principles.

He went up to one of the doors and pushed it. He called the old man and in the light of the lantern saw a large stove, a tiled floor and some brass pans. The two windows were shuttered. Slivenko pointed out the kitchen door to the soldiers. They went in readily. Closing the door after them, Slivenko said, pointing to the keyhole:

"Lock it."

The old man began fussing about and ran outside, his footsteps resounded on the staircase in some distant part

of the empty house. At last he returned with a bunch of keys and locked the kitchen door.

Then Slivenko asked:

"Where are the Russians?"

This the old man did not understand, and stood still with his little grey bird-like head cocked on one side. And when he understood, he began waving his arms:

"Weg, weg, weg," he croaked.

They had gone. They had been driven further to the west.

"And where's your master? Master? Where's the baron? Count?"

The old man understood at last and again began waving his arms:

"Weg, auch weg! . . ."

He stamped his feet comically as if to say: ran off, took to his heels.

"And so you are looking after his property?" asked Slivenko. "All right then. . . Where are your wife and children? Kinder?"

The old man went on ahead, Slivenko following him. They left the master's house. At the very end of the courtyard stood a little cottage, stuck to the wall like a swallow's nest.

They went in. Slivenko saw women's faces, distorted with fear. An old woman and three daughters.

A malicious feeling caught hold of Slivenko. He stared attentively and for a long time at the three German daughters.

"So the Russian girls are weg, Rus kinder weg, over there to the west. . . ." he grumbled, "well, the deutsch kinder over there, to the east, march-march. . . ."

Then he was surprised. The German women obviously understood this comparison but understood it as an order. Having exchanged a few phrases with their mother, they began to get ready to leave. They did not even make

much fuss. They wrapped their clothes in a bundle. The mother did not weep. They all seemed to recognize the justice of it. The Russian girls had been driven away, now it was the German women's turn. Only the youngest trembled, although she tried as hard as she could to restrain herself, fearing to anger the Russian with any unwarranted discontent. Then they stopped and waited.

They were a sorry sight and when Slivenko understood what was happening, he unexpectedly burst out laughing. Only a man with a heart of gold could have laughed so kindly and the German women realized this. They looked with surprise and hope at the laughing Russian soldier. He waved his arm and said:

"Nix Siberia . . . go to hell."

Then he felt ashamed at his own tolerance and hissed so threateningly at the German women who had started chattering joyfully that they subsided immediately. To himself he said: They drove away your daughter, plundered your house and you are sorry for them?

But then he glanced at their big red hands, the hands of people accustomed to heavy peasant work, and to tell the truth, he did at heart pity them: Was it *they* who were slave drivers? Were *they* plunderers?

With such thoughts Senior Sergeant Slivenko returned to his company, marching behind the German soldiers he had captured.

The company was no longer there.

Divisional Headquarters was already in the village. The signallers were dragging their wires along, yawning and swearing mildly.

"Still on the run, even here," said one, "on his own soil. . . . Where will he stop? Doesn't even give you a chance to sleep, the devil!"

Slivenko handed over the Germans to the scouts who had now taken over the house where the Second Company had been stationed two hours ago, and quietly—with that

unhurried look, characteristic of the experienced soldier who knows he cannot be late—set off towards the west, to his own regiment.

On the road he was overtaken by a car, in which sat Colonel Plotnikov and Major Garin. Recognizing the soldier walking down the road as the Party organizer of one of his companies, the Colonel stopped the car.

"I'll give you a lift. Have you held the meeting about the entry into Germany?" asked Plotnikov.

"Yes, I have, Comrade Colonel," answered Slivenko and added: "I have prepared three soldiers for the Party and they still haven't been called before the Party Commission."

"Yes, just can't find the time," said Plotnikov guiltily. "We go on advancing and advancing. There's trouble in that, too, it seems!" he smiled his broad, kindly smile.

Silent for a moment, Slivenko asked:

"And what about the Germans, Comrade Colonel?"

Plotnikov, surprised, glanced at Garin, and then asked Slivenko:

"And what do you think?"

"I think," answered Slivenko slowly, stroking his black moustache, "that we have to be a bit easier with them now. That is with the civilians. Just as if they were not Germans at all . . . but simply people."

Plotnikov burst out laughing.

"That's the right touch! He's got the right touch!" he turned to Garin, lowering his voice a little, as if he did not want Slivenko to hear his praise. Then he turned again to the Party organizer: "You are right. Keep to that."

Then Plotnikov started talking to Garin about Veselchakov and Glasha. The corps was demanding a final decision about this affair. Garin maintained heatedly that it was unjust to separate two fine people who were in love with each other.

"Of course, I'm sorry for them," said Plotnikov. "All the same, think thoroughly over the conclusions. And what were you doing at the Divisional Headquarters?" he turned suddenly to Slivenko.

"I was bringing in some prisoners," answered Slivenko, then, for truth's sake, he added: "and I was looking for my daughter."

In answer to the Colonel's questioning glance Slivenko explained in an apologetic voice:

"My daughter. She's here in Germany. They drove her away from the Donbas. Only there's no one left in that manor house. They've driven them further away to the west."

Colonel Plotnikov's face grew distracted and gloomy. Making no reply, he began to stare at the road.

Along the road in the dank morning mist tired men and machines stretched in a column towards the west. A field postal van passed, carrying off soldiers' letters, then empty lorries, their ammunition delivered. Wet snow was falling. The bare branches of the trees swayed. The soldiers' capes flapped in the wind like sails.

The men moved on silently. Machine-gun fire sounded quite close. At the crossroads Slivenko asked them to stop the car—it was turning off to the right here, to Regimental Headquarters. He jumped out, took his leave and went on to where the machine-gun fire was especially fierce.

VIII

When they had left Chokhov's carriage far behind, the Major of the Guards again looked round at the General. Sizokrylov was sitting just as still with his eyes closed. "Dead tired," thought Lubentsov sympathetically. At that moment Sizokrylov with an almost imperceptible expression either of anger or obstinacy, threw

back his head, opened his eyes and turning to the Tank-General sitting beside him, asked:

"Were you a long time coming from the Urals?"

The Major-General, who had not expected the question, started and replied:

"Four days. We took the equipment and they put us on the troop train straightaway."

"And you did the whole journey in four days?"

"That's right."

"At Comrade Stalin's orders they fixed up a 'green street' for us," added the tankman, smiling broadly.

Sizokrylov's face brightened and he said, unexpectedly turning to Lubentsov:

"Do you know what a 'green street' is, Major?"

Lubentsov spread out his arms uncomprehendingly and Sizokrylov began to explain:

"It's a railway line with only green signals on it. There are powerful engines ready with steam up standing at every junction. The engines are changed and the troop trains flash on through a row of green signals to the next engine, waiting its turn at the next junction. And there's not a wink of red along the whole line, not a single stop—the line is absolutely clear. That's organization!"

"The inspectors," added the Major-General proudly, "examined the cars on the run. It's not a train journey—it's a flight! That was the Supreme Commander's order! Still haven't collected my senses...."

There was a silence. They passed through deserted villages, empty save for howling dogs and untended cows. The wind buffeted the wet snow against the windows of the car. After a while they arrived in a small town with paved side streets and two-storied houses with high tiled roofs. Sizokrylov asked:

"How's our bodyguard? Not very far behind?"

The Adjutant looked through the back window—

there was no armoured troop carrier. "We'll wait," said Sizokrylov.

The driver stopped on a small square. Sizokrylov opened the door and climbed out of the car. The others followed him. He looked round and thinking aloud, said:

"This is Vorobyov's sector, it seems."

Lubentsov peered curiously at the dark square and the outlines of the houses. Tanya was serving in Colonel Vorobyov's division and for this reason the small town engulfed in darkness seemed to Lubentsov worthy of the closest attention.

It was quite an ordinary, dull little town full of nocturnal rustlings and sounds. In the courtyards horses neighed, footsteps and the hushed voices of soldiers mingled with the sentries' distant challenges.

General Sizokrylov thoughtfully paced to and fro along the pavement, his firm tread ringing across the narrow square. Finally he stopped in the middle near the dark silhouette of a tall monument. The General switched on his torch and all of them saw a soaring cast-iron eagle on a stone pedestal and below it—carved in stone and encircled with an iron laurel wreath, the figures: "1870-1871."

The General switched off his torch and said:

"To the victors of Sedan from their grateful fellow citizens. . . . It's a pompous little place. . . ."

Headlights appeared round the bend. The armoured troop carrier drove on to the square, lighting up everything—the sharp-pointed roof of the town hall, the snow-caked fountain and the cast-iron eagle on the monument. It immediately shut off its headlights. The Lieutenant in command of the machine gunners thrust himself forward out of the darkness. Over his shoulder Lubentsov caught sight of Chibiryov's face.

The General asked:

"Are we going too fast?"

"It would be good to go a little slower," confessed the Lieutenant.

"So be it," said the General.

Everyone smiled, except the Lieutenant. He was very young and considered it out of place to smile when carrying out important duties. Besides he was not satisfied with the enigmatic and indefinite words "so be it," and he still stood waiting for a clear answer.

"We will go more slowly," explained Sizokrylov.

They all took their places again. The car moved off.

"Anyone who smokes can smoke," said Sizokrylov suddenly.

The Tank-General and the Colonel lighted up gladly. By the light of their cigarettes and the gleaming dials of the instruments on the car's dashboard Lubentsov, turning round, again noticed that the member of the Military Council had his eyes half-closed and was either thinking or dozing. But no, he was not dozing. After a minute he shook himself and, as if carrying on a conversation, already begun, said:

"But the Germans still go on believing the Hitler propaganda. Look at the villages, there's hardly a soul left. The German radio screams about the horrors of the Russian invasion, calling on the civilian population to flee to the west. And they do flee. Our agents are bringing in terrible details of this stampede. People dying of cold and hunger. Hitler has apparently decided to drag at least half of Germany into the abyss, together with himself. Like a cannibal chief dragging live people into his grave, so as not to be left without subjects in the other world...." After a short silence Sizokrylov said: "And now we're on Polish territory again...."

The car was speeding along a wet road leaving tyre tracks behind it. Whirls of snow spun in the light of the headlights as if they had been caught by surprise and were dashing aside in panic, leaving new ones to take

their place. Lubentsov peered tensely into the darkness, fearing to miss the right turning. Although he knew the road, it was daylight last time he had driven to the tank unit. At night everything seemed different and by all his calculations there should have been a turning already; after a little chapel there was a small wood to go through and then a sharp turn to the right. But there was no chapel and no wood. He shot a glance at the speedometer—they had already travelled sixty-eight kilometres: before the start Lubentsov had checked the distance as he always did. Surely we can't have missed the turning?

As always, during night journeys on an unfamiliar road, everything seemed to lack any particular distinctive marks. Even the road seemed wider, and the trees along its edges taller than by day. Lubentsov reassured himself—we can't have arrived at the turning yet, because the car is going slowly; the driver is afraid of leaving the armoured troop carrier and the machine gunners behind. But now the speedometer was showing seventy-seven kilometres. Lubentsov became seriously worried.

"What about the speedometer? Is it working?" he asked the driver, outwardly indifferent.

"It's acting up," answered the driver in a whisper. "It needs repairing but I just can't find the time. We're always on the move...."

Lubentsov sighed with relief and glanced sideways at the General. He was looking straight ahead of him. A deep furrow had formed above the bridge of his nose.

The long-awaited chapel flew past. Lubentsov said: "To the right."

A small town appeared. Here, Lubentsov blessed his habit of counting the blocks; in town it is hardest of all to find the right road and one has often to drive round the backstreets. True, Lubentsov was saved by his experience and instinct, he nearly always *felt* the right turning, so to speak. But in this case the Guards Major had his

own "method" as well; he had an unconscious habit of counting the turns. Fifth block on the right, he remembered, then third on the left, then first on the left and then you come out on to the main road. Fifth or sixth? Yes, fifth, on the corner there's a milestone and a broken lamppost.

"To the right," he said to the driver.

The car turned and drove on up to the third block. Lubentsov commanded "to the left," then again "to the left." He did this with a certain self-satisfaction, compensating himself for the alarm he had experienced earlier. The houses grew fewer and fewer, then they disappeared entirely. They drove through a forest.

"How many times have you travelled along this road?" the General asked suddenly.

"Once."

"Excellent memory," the member of the Military Council praised him and asked: "Have you been long with Taras Petrovich?"

"A year and a half."

"That means it was you who organized the daylight raid between the Vistula and the Bug."

"Yes."

"I remember that occasion. It was a clever operation. Are you a member of the Party?"

"Yes."

"What were you before the war?"

"A lieutenant."

"Ah, you are a regular army officer!"

"Yes."

"If you are a regular army officer, perhaps you should go to work at a higher headquarters. . . . There's no harm in widening one's military horizon. . . ." He paused, waiting with a kind of strange curiosity for Lubentsov's answer.

The latter shook his head and said:

"No, Comrade General, allow me to finish the war in my own division."

The General's adjutant was surprised at the talkativeness of the member of the Military Council and his interest in the unknown officer. The Adjutant, of course, knew that General Sizokrylov was a close observer of people. Sizokrylov loved people but his love was hidden and deep and completely devoid of sentimentality. Some even considered him cruel.

Sizokrylov knew that he was feared and this sometimes hurt him very much. He liked Lubentsov just because there was no sign in him of that contemptible fear of his superiors. That means he is honest, decided Sizokrylov, and knows his job. . . .

"Think it over," he said. "I can tell Malyshev."

"No, Comrade General, don't tell him. He'll take your words as an order and they'll transfer me on the spot. . . ."

"As you will," said the General quite dispassionately and again closed his eyes.

"It looks like we've arrived," said the driver.

The car drove into a big village. Although it was completely dark, one could sense that the village was full of people. Someone's face appeared at the window of the car while it was still moving, a barrier swung into the air. Sentries in short white sheepskin coats stood at attention; several shadows waved their arms; here and there pocket torches flashed, hushed voices were heard. The car stopped.

IX

The member of the Military Council was expected. Ten men stood at attention by the car. A stocky man in a *papakha** said loudly and distinctly:

"Atten-shun! Comrade Lieutenant-General. . . ."

Sizokrylov interrupted him impatiently:

* A Caucasian fur cap.

"Let me introduce the commander of a tank brigade. He's come straight from the Urals to reinforce you. Be ready to receive the new brigade."

The generals walked quickly up to the house. The doors slammed; then all was quiet.

Lubentsov was at a loss. He had fulfilled his mission and now did not know what he should do next: go after the member of the Military Council or stay in the car with the driver. He chose the middle course: climbed out of the car and began walking up and down by the fence.

The sub-machine gunners clambered out of the armoured troop carrier and to warm themselves smacked their sides like coachmen with big clumsy hands in mittens. The young Lieutenant stood near the carrier, alert and severe, waiting for further instructions. Chibiryov came up quietly to the Major of the Guards and smoked in silence, illuminating the drum of his sub-machine gun with the yellow glow of his cigarette. Soon the driver climbed out of the car; he lighted up, approached Lubentsov and said:

"So, you can see like a cat in the dark, can you, Comrade Major? That's a rare talent. I've been driving the member of the Military Council for a year and a half already—he's on wheels nearly all the time—I wish I had your ability. . . . Can you use a map as well or is it just by memory?"

Lubentsov did not have time to answer. An officer came quickly towards them and asked loudly:

"Who is the commander of the Military Council's machine gunners?"

The Lieutenant came forward silently.

"Take your men into that hut. Get warm and have supper. Everything is ready there. Where is the reconnaissance major?"

"Here I am," answered Lubentsov.

"Come with me."

Lubentsov followed the officer into the large house into which General Sizokrylov had disappeared a few minutes ago. After passing along corridors in semidarkness, they entered a large brightly-lighted room, where about ten girl wireless-operators were sitting at radio sets. The girls were receiving radiograms, taking down long columns of figures on to sheets of paper. Near each one of them an officer was either sitting or walking nervously up and down.

It was hot in the room from the brightly burning stoves. Orders were given briefly:

"Get in touch with Petrov!"

"Ask why he doesn't report about his neighbours!"

"Have they reached Landsberg!"

"Ask again where the Germans have counterattacked!"

"Get in touch with the stormoviks!"

Sometimes remarks were heard such as:

"Damn!... Tell him to carry out his mission!"

"Send: 'fuel is just coming.'"

The officer accompanying Lubentsov vanished and the Major leaned against the wall so as not to be in anybody's way. In spite of the pressure of work, the girls contrived to dart a curious glance at the guest and pat their hair.

One lieutenant-colonel, looking through a sheet of figures, exclaimed joyfully:

"Samoilov has reached Landsberg! I'll go and report!"

He buttoned his tunic and disappeared into the next room.

Most of the officers went away from time to time with sheets of paper into the next room and returned almost at once.

The officer who had accompanied Lubentsov soon reappeared.

"The member of the Military Council invites you to supper."

Lubentsov followed the officer. In the next room staff officers were sitting at large tables spread with maps, marking the changes of tank positions. The infantryman in Lubentsov felt a certain envy of those working at tank headquarters. Here, within one hour, changes took place which the footsloggers could not even dream about! Without them though, the tanks could not go far either.

Generals' greatcoats were hanging and lying about in one of the rooms.

"Take off your coat," the officer whispered to Lubentsov. Lubentsov did as he was told and half-opened the door into the next room. Tank chiefs and an airforce general were sitting at a table laid for supper. There were ten men in all.

The member of the Military Council was pacing up and down, ever turning the situation over in his mind. The offensive was moving ahead successfully. But from the report of the Chief of Staff, General Sergievsky—who usually made careful reports without drawing hasty conclusions—and from the wireless conversation with the tanks commander advancing with the operations section, Sizokrylov realized that the situation was becoming more complicated every hour. In the first place, the tanks had broken away from the infantry to a distance of fifty or a hundred kilometres. The tank regiments cutting through Eastern Germany had lost tanks and personnel. Communications had been partly destroyed by some efficient German divisions. Ammunition and fuel supply were being carried out under very difficult conditions. German aircraft had destroyed one motor column. The greatest difficulty was that many brigades had exhausted their fuel and the tankers had not yet returned from the bases in the rear with new supplies.

"Why haven't they arrived yet?" asked Sizokrylov, stopping suddenly in front of Sergievsky.

Sergievsky stood up, but made no reply.

"Don't you know?" asked Sizokrylov. "Then I will explain it to you. You have entrusted a most important task, the supplying of petrol to subordinates, and in some cases even to drivers. You sent the vehicles and then thought no more about it. But there ought to have been responsible staff officers with them."

He again began pacing the room, then he asked:

"Have you called Karelin yet?"

"I have, Comrade General," answered Sergievsky.

General Karelin was in command of an artillery division, which was en route with its heavy guns. He had stopped for the night at the next village. An officer had been sent to wake him up and bring him here. He came in, a big, red-cheeked, ginger-haired, rather sprightly man. After introducing himself loudly, he stood still, waiting for the questions of the member of the Military Council.

"How are things going, Karelin?" Sizokrylov asked quietly.

"Thank you, Comrade General!" answered Karelin smiling. "Everything's in order. The ordnance guns are ready to smash Berlin. The timetable has been kept punctually. The men are eager to push on with the infantry. At dawn I shall move on further."

"Good fellows!" said Sizokrylov and repeated: "good fellows!"

He started walking about the room then stopped again and asked:

"And have you got fuel?"

"Enough!" exclaimed Karelin joyfully. "Enough to Berlin! The engines are chock-full."

"Sit down and have supper," invited Sizokrylov.

Karelin threw off his coat, sat down at the table and grasped a knife and fork with his huge, red hands.

"And the fuel," continued Sizokrylov, "all of it, you understand, all of it—every last drop, you will hand over to the tanks."

Karelin dropped his fork and stared helplessly at the member of the Military Council. His face fell immediately.

"And me? What about me?" he asked in a trembling voice and everybody felt sorry for this huge cheerful man, so suddenly hurled by two words from the heights of elation to the depths of despair.

"Get the petrol carriers ready," said Sizokrylov to Sergievsky, "they will go with Karelin's order to his division and collect fuel. Write out the order," he turned to Karelin. "Write: transfer immediately on receipt all the fuel at present in the division to the petrol carriers of the tank units. Reason: order of the Military Council. Sign it. Have supper with me and then go back to your own division and check personally the fulfilling of your order."

General Sergievsky brightened up, joyfully took Karelin's note and ran, almost skipping like a schoolboy, to give the order. Karelin remained sitting at the table, black as a thundercloud. He could no longer eat and stared with glassy eyes at the tablecloth. They were all silent. The member of the Military Council was silent too. He ate hardly anything, soon rose from his chair and asked:

"Hasn't the new brigade come yet? From the Urals? Who went to receive it?"

"Colonel Beryozov."

"How far is the disembarking station?"

"Sixty kilometres."

He looked at Karelin, turned away and said to the tank-generals:

"The damaged tanks must be recommissioned on the battlefield. You have plenty of experience in that. The fitter is now the key man in your formations. Those who have especially distinguished themselves should be recommended for the title of Hero of the Soviet Union."

At last he turned to Karelin: "I see I have spoilt your appetite. Well then, go to your division and check up on the carrying out of the order. I know the local patriotism of your artillerymen. They will probably be unwilling to give up the fuel. So you had better check the thing personally."

Karelin mumbled "yes," put on his coat and went out.

Everyone listened. Karelin's angry voice resounded outside:

"Start her up! Move! Have you gone to sleep?"

The member of the Military Council chuckled but said nothing.

Sergievsy came in and reported that the petrol carriers had already been sent to collect fuel

"And we shall have a talk another time," said Sizokrylov tersely, "about your supply-men."

He listened—motors roared in the distance.

"The brigade is on the move," said Sergievsy.

A minute later the General who had ridden in the car with Sizokrylov came into the room. He reported that the brigade had arrived and was concentrating in the forest.

"Let us go into the radio room," said Sizokrylov.

They all stood up, as if by command, and followed Sizokrylov and Sergievsy into another room.

Lubentsov was again left alone and again had the uncomfortable feeling that he was not needed and that his presence here was accidental. Then once again the door half-opened and the Tank-Colonel called him, saying jokingly:

"Why do you always lag behind? The member of the Military Council asks about you every time."

Lubentsov, moved by the attention of the General, who in spite of the urgency of his affairs, found time to remember a scarcely known major, followed the others. The generals crowded into the small room. Sizokrylov was not there. A tense silence reigned.

"He is speaking to Comrade Stalin," said someone standing near the door, in a whisper.

Somebody looked at his watch. His example was followed for some reason by everybody, including Lubentsov. The hour was late, or rather early—four o'clock in the morning. They all exchanged glances which expressed the same joyous thought: Stalin is at work.

At last Sizokrylov appeared. Glancing round at those present, he said:

"The instructions received are as follows: advance to the Oder at all costs and gain a foothold on the Oder. Don't engage in battles for fortified towns, pass round them and move on ahead. Schneidemühl, Deutsch-Krone, Landsberg, Küstrin should be by-passed. We will take those points with infantry. Your job is—to destroy the German reserves on the approaches to the fortified regions, to cut off the Germans' defence and, above all, to come out on to the Oder. Intelligence reports the extreme confusion of Hitler and his staff."

He paused, then said something which riveted everyone's attention:

"And you must learn that it is not only Hitler's staff. Those who formerly, when our blood was flowing, delayed the opening of the second front in every possible way, are now hastening forward at all speed. . . . It is not difficult to understand that today every one of your tank-men, fitters and supply-men is helping to make political history.

"Now we'll visit the Urals troops and then—home." Sizokrylov immediately changed the subject and, searching out Lubentsov, nodded to him.

"Won't you stay with us until morning?" asked Sergievsky. "Rest a little."

"No, I must report to the Military Council. And I should think it's time for you to change your headquarters and move on to the west.

"Yes, Comrade General."

Turning to all the others Sizokrylov said:

"You are free, comrades."

The generals took their leave and departed, all except Sergievsky. Sizokrylov walked slowly about the room where they had been having supper. After a short silence Sergievsky said in a changed voice, nervously crushing a rolled map which happened to be in his hand:

"Comrade General, Lieutenant of the Guards Sizokrylov has died a hero's death. His tank smashed through to a river crossing and...."

"They told me all about it on the telephone in great detail," said Sizokrylov in a tired voice.

"It happened the day before yesterday at sixteen thirty. I immediately ordered that you should be informed."

"They have informed me." After a pause Sizokrylov said: "Have you been told of my request that the regiment should for the time being refrain from informing my wife in Moscow of what has happened?"

"Yes, Comrade General." Sergievsky's big, slightly pock-marked face twitched for a moment. "An order to that effect has been given."

They put on their coats in silence and went out on to the street. It was windy and damp. The engines of the cars clattered in the thick early morning mist. The machine gunners were already in their places in the armoured troop carrier. The young Lieutenant stood at attention by the General's car. On seeing the General, he raised his hand to his cap and reported:

"Armoured troop carrier is ready to proceed."

Sizokrylov asked:

"Did they treat you well, the tankmen? Did they feed you?"

"They did," answered the Lieutenant, still utterly serious.

"Then let's go."

Sergievsy's captured Horch went ahead, behind it—the Emka belonging to the commander of the Urals brigade, followed by the member of the Military Council's car and the armoured carrier.

As before, Lubentsov sat with the driver, although now there was no need for him to watch the road.

All that he had seen and heard at the tank unit—the story of the "green street" from the Urals to Germany, the sense of the unusual power and speed of the tank thrust, Sizokrylov's conversation with Stalin from this distant Polish village, and finally the unexpected revealing of General Sizokrylov's loss,—all these things deeply impressed him and seemed to him to be inseparably bound together. Even the General's concern for his machine gunners and his attentiveness towards Lubentsov, appeared to have some unusually important meaning and also seemed to have a direct relation to Stalin and to the irresistible strength of our offensive.

The Major's thoughts were interrupted by a mighty 'Hurrah.' The car stopped. In the forest clearing, into which they had driven, tanks were standing. Red flags flew at their turrets. The tankmen, wearing new leather helmets, froze to attention in a straight line beside their machines. In front stood a tall tankman holding an unfurled red banner. Snow, dislodged by the shouts, sprinkled down from the fir trees.

Sizokrylov slowly left the car and began speaking in a clear and calm voice that although unexpectedly loud was still friendly and conversational:

"Comrades tankmen! I will be brief, because time does not wait and you must be on the move. I have just spoken on the telephone with Comrade Stalin. Before you lies a task of the greatest importance: to advance in the

shortest possible time to the outskirts of the city of Berlin."

The forest resounded with thundering applause and shouts of "Hurrah." Pausing for a moment, Sizokrylov continued:

"Your comrades have made a gigantic jump forward from the Vistula. You who have arrived here along Stalin's 'green street' from the Urals, must complete this task together with them. The Military Council is certain that you will cope with your task because you belong to the army of Communists, of Stalinites—of men who fear no obstacles. You are tank soldiers—the main battering ram of the army of working people who for the first time in history have taken power into their own hands and have been able to create a force so formidable that it fears none of the military and political combinations of our enemies. You will now set forth on your glorious and arduous campaign. The Military Council wishes you success."

"May I carry on?" asked Sergievsky.

"Carry on."

The member of the Military Council took his place in the car and they moved off. Behind them sounded the roar of engines which shook the forest, scattering snow on the tanks, the armoured carrier, the "Katyushas" and the self-propelled guns.

Before they parted General Sergievsky thrust a rolled map into Lubentsov's hand.

"For the member of the Military Council," he whispered.

While Sizokrylov was taking leave of the tankmen, Lubentsov had time to glance at this map. The 1:50,000 map reproduced a small area of windmills and woods. Its centre was marked in red pencil with a small cross, over which the pen of the topographer had written: "Here, on the 2nd of February 1945, Lieutenant

of the Guards Sizokrylov, Andrei Georgievich, was buried."

The wheels swished softly over the wet snow. It grew lighter. Glancing sideways at the member of the Military Council, Lubentsov saw that he was again sitting with closed eyes.

General Sizokrylov was trying not to think about his son. But that meant the thought was with him all the time. He soon realized this, but tried as before to divert his thoughts with other important matters: about fuel supplies, about the synchronization of tanks and airforce, about the necessity of pushing up the infantry so as not to let them lag far behind the tanks.

But the thought that his only son had been killed rose inevitably out of the jumble of other thoughts. Sometimes for a second it thrust aside everything else and remained quite alone in all its fearful nakedness. At one such moment the General let a groan escape him, but immediately opened his eyes and said hurriedly, turning to his adjutant:

"Don't forget, as soon as we arrive, to give orders in my name for the immediate supply of petrol to Karelin."

"Right," replied the Colonel.

"And now we are driving through Germany," went on Sizokrylov, "and even we ourselves do not fully realize the significance of the fact. . . . What matters here is not only the victory of our arms but the victory of our spirit, our way of thinking, our system of educating the people, our historical path. One can't help thinking of 1918 when the mighty German Empire, which, by the way, was a good deal weaker than Hitler's Empire, hung threateningly over young Soviet Russia. Lenin and Stalin then insisted on the conclusion of a peace with Germany . . . 'the unfortunate peace,' as Vladimir Ilyich called it. . . . Our leaders agreed to that peace because they understood that the main thing was to guard and

strengthen our Soviet Homeland, to build socialism, that is, a system capable of ensuring victory over any enemy. . . . And now we are in Germany."

The General found strength in these reflections. They reminded him that he was a worker in a great Party and that it was not fitting for him to forget this under any circumstances.

It is not easy in my situation, thought the General, frowning painfully, to remain a calm, sober leader, who is above all earthly misfortunes. It's difficult for generals. . . . And for generals' wives?—he thought suddenly, remembering his own wife.

When Andrei completed his training at the tank school, Anna Konstantinovna had asked her husband shyly to take his son with him. "Let him be with you," she had said, blushing. "After all you are supposed to have some kind of adjutants about you." She knew her husband well and for that very reason was shy in speaking to him about their son. Indeed, as she might have expected, he grew angry and said reproachfully: "But you must know, Anna, that I will never agree to that. And you also know very well that Andrei himself would not want to hide from the war behind a general's back and even less—behind his father's. . . ."

Did he regret his answer now? No!

And yet it was terrible to think of his wife now and hard to justify himself in the face of a mother's grief.

Sizokrylov clenched his teeth and forced his eyes open. It was quite light. They passed through the town with the memorial to the "Victors of Sedan." Wagon trains stretched along the road. The carts creaked softly. The sight of the fair-haired back of Lubentsov's head again reminded the General of his son.

"Your division, Major, will have to besiege the fortress of Schneidemühl," he said. "That is one of the most strongly fortified points of the so-called Eastern Wall.

Remember that, when you are drawing up your plan of reconnaissance." After a pause he added: "You can find your way excellently at night. That does you credit as a scout."

The car drove up to the village where the Divisional Headquarters had been set up the evening before. The driver slowed down. Lubentsov placed the mapsheet, twisted into a roll, beside him and nodded towards the General. The driver inclined his head understandingly.

"Give my regards to Sereda and Plotnikov," said Sizokrylov, shaking the Major's hand.

Lubentsov climbed out of the car and saw Chibiryov jumping out of the armoured carrier at the same time. Raising his hand to his cap, Lubentsov waited until the cars had passed. At last they were out of sight.

Chibiryov said:

"The sub-machine gunners were telling me about him. And about his son. . . . M-yes. . . ." He ended rather shortly and quietly: "That is a man."

They walked into the village but the Divisional Headquarters had already left. The corps signallers, roaming with coils of wire over the snow-covered field, informed them that the division had advanced at dawn and that Headquarters had moved on to another village, further west.

Lubentsov decided to call in at the house where the scouts had quartered the day before, just in case there was somebody still left there. They went in. The house stood empty and cold. The featherbeds were still lying about and the clocks struck with the same whirring, creaking sound.

"Well, let's go and get a lift on the road," said Lubentsov.

At that moment he noticed in a far corner a man sleeping on one of the featherbeds.

"See, they've left someone here," said Chibiryov and went up to the figure wrapped in the blanket.

A funny, frightened face appeared. It belonged to an elderly German in spectacles, unshaven and wearing a woman's kerchief on his head. Over the kerchief he wore a black, crumpled hat. At the sight of the scouts he jumped up, took off his hat and bowed politely. Chibiryov grinned. From the German's mumbled words Lubentsov made out that the German was the owner of this house. Frightened by what was happening he had run away to the forest. Now that all was quiet again, he had returned home.

"Uhrmeister," said the German, pointing now at himself, now at the clocks.

"Clockmaker," Lubentsov translated to his orderly.

"That means he's a working man," Chibiryov stopped grinning and pulled a chunk of bread out of his pocket.

"Danke schön, danke schön," said the German thanking him.

"Damn poshoy yourself," snorted Chibiryov mimicking the German; apparently he rather regretted his own generosity.

The scouts left, but the clockmaker still stood munching the bread and mumbling to himself in his incomprehensible language.

XI

When the Russians were out of sight, the German stood still for about another minute listening, then lowered himself on to the featherbed and sat there for a long time without moving.

His face lost its expression of exaggerated fright and deliberate stupidity. But even now his colleagues would hardly have been able to recognize in this comically dressed old tramp, Konrad Winckel (No. 217-F) from the

special R-department of the Intelligence Service, Army Group Headquarters.

When he saw the Russians coming in, Winckel had intended to disclose his identity and give himself up. Then he changed his mind, being scared to death of what might happen, and pretended to be the owner of the house. It had occurred to him to assume the trade of clockmaker at the sight of the numerous clocks in the house and also because, in the course of his three weeks of wandering, he had seen more than once that the Russians treated working people well.

He was confused and demoralized. What he formerly had guessed, was now a terrifying reality: Germany was defeated. But this was not the main cause of his utter despair. What had happened was worse than a military defeat. It was the collapse of the hopes and dreams of Winckel's generation of Germans.

Konrad Winckel had lived all his life in Danzig. The Germans of the "free city," inflamed by Hitlerite propaganda, incited continuously by the agents of Hess, Rosenberg and Bohle and filled with hatred of their rivals—the Poles, were rabid chauvinists. Despite the cautious remonstrations of their father, a clever and sceptical man, the young Winckels—Konrad, Hugo and Bernhard—marched exultantly in the ranks of the Hitler youth battalions and Storm troopers, shouted "Heil Hitler" and held forth about Germany's great mission in Europe. Formerly rather quiet lads, inclined to study, they gradually turned into reckless young Hitlerite louts, poisoned by lies.

These sleek, anaemic lanky young men, ardent and rather corrupted, began to imagine themselves invincible, terrifying, intrepid "blond beasts." The cult of violence became their philosophy of life. The megalomania which had become a state doctrine, had a magical effect on young oafs from Königsberg to the Tyrol.

True, in the midst of all this frenzy Konrad, the eldest of the brothers (in 1938 he was already twenty-five), had some misgivings. There was much that he did not like. Rumours reached him about SS atrocities, about concentration camps, about mass executions and deportations. He tried not to examine the facts too closely—that would have been dangerous. His typical burgher's faith in authority did not allow him to doubt too strongly. Once the Reichschancellor, whose authority was so great even in foreign countries (there was, incidentally, in this reference to foreign countries, a poisonous drop of uncertainty as to the Führer's prestige), once professors, scientists, writers, the old Reichsministers, von Blomberg and von Neurath (the old ones were trusted more than the new ones: they were more respectable), once the Reichswehr generals and even Hindenburg himself who had called Hitler to power, once they all said "this is necessary," what was there to doubt?!

If for the good of Germany it was necessary to destroy whole nations—what then was to be done? One had to kill. There was no way of getting round it. One had to deceive? So what? Fools were just made to be deceived.

With these and other similar thoughts Konrad Winkel and his like stifled in themselves the voice of conscience which occasionally whispered unpleasant things. Of course if it were possible for others to do the fighting that would be quite all right. But now they themselves had to fight.

Hugo, Bernhard and Konrad joined the army one after the other. Bernhard, however, did not fight long: both of his legs were blown off and he returned home with considerable doubts as to the expediency of solving controversial questions by means of war. At first Konrad served at the Cracow Headquarters of Dr. Frank, Governor-General of what had once been Poland. His knowledge of the Polish language, which he so despised, came

in very handy. In the last "total" mobilization, in the summer of 1944, he was transferred to intelligence work at the headquarters of an army group. There he went through a short course in the science of espionage and afterwards served in the counterespionage service in the rear of the German army. Winckel was, of course, deeply disturbed by the retreat of the German army to the Vistula line. As a spy he knew that the newspaper articles, saying that after such a push the Russians no longer had the strength to attack, were false. However, he was sure that the defences on the Vistula were mighty and invincible forces. Three weeks ago when the German army stood on the Vistula, Konrad Winckel had not supposed that these mighty defences would fall to pieces at a blow from the Russians. True, the blow was very heavy. The staff officers, who during the Russian attack had been in the forward area or near it, were recounting terrible details. The Soviet artillery and air force had literally swept everything from their path.

On January 13, at Group Headquarters Winckel met his younger brother, Hugo, who had recently received Oak Leaves to his Iron Cross. Hugo had arrived at Headquarters on some assignment.

On the morning of January 14, they heard a distant, mighty thunder of artillery.

"It's started," said Konrad, going pale.

Hugo listened, shook his head and said:

"Even if the Russians break through here and there, we will stop them on the line from Bromberg to Poznan and in Silesia, wonderfully fitted for defence...."

True, Hugo did not mention a word about the Führer: he was relying only on the Military Command.

"Our generals are experienced men," he said, buttoning up his tunic hastily. "They will organize new defence positions. Well, good-bye. I'm off. Hope we'll meet again."

In two hours it became known that the Russians had

broken through on a broad front. But even then Winckel was far from thinking the situation catastrophic.

It was a long way to Germany. The Russians would soon tire themselves out. The Eastern Wall—a huge chain of well-established fortifications on the old German frontier—that, in any case, would bar the Russians' way to the vital centres of the Empire.

In the meantime Headquarters became suspiciously worried and in the evening developed feverish haste. Lorries were loaded with anything and everything. The whole place was in commotion.

Winckel was summoned by Colonel Böhm. The conversation took place in a cellar because the Russian air force seemed to have discovered the location of the Headquarters and was bombing the village almost incessantly. Winckel was ordered to put on civilian clothes and proceed with a radio set to Hohenzalz—a Polish town, formerly called Inowroclaw. His task was to send radio messages about the progress and strength of Russian troops. Code—the same. The Colonel handed Winckel documents in the name of Wladyslaw Walewski, a Warsaw real estate broker. Disguised as a refugee from Warsaw he was to settle down in Hohenzalz with a Polish shopkeeper, a secret German agent, who would look after him. The Colonel also said that in a neighbouring town, Altburgund (the Polish town of Szubin, also renamed in the German style), there was a Lieutenant Richard Hanne, who had already been sent there with the same assignment; he was posing as a Polish mechanic. The Colonel gave Winckel three additional contact points in Germany in case he should have to move further west, and then dismissed him. Winckel ran at full speed to the house at which he had been told to report. Major Siebert who was climbing into his car, stopped reluctantly, and shouted: "Give him a transmitter!"—and drove off immediately. A gloomy Stabsfeldwebel showed Winckel a dozen radio-

transmitters lying on the floor and demanded a receipt. Winckel sat down to write a receipt. The whole building was shaking with the roar of Russian bombs. The Stabsfeldwebel thought for a moment and said:

"All right, take it without a receipt."

Winckel looked distractedly at the transmitter. How would he carry it? Luckily he noticed a wheelbarrow in the courtyard. He put the transmitter and batteries on to this wheelbarrow and, pushing it in front of him, went over to "section II-B." Böhm had already left. People were running about near the cars, not wanting to answer questions. At last Oberleutnant Hauss appeared, a colleague and acquaintance of Winckel's.

"Where are you off to?" asked Hauss in a whisper.

"To Hohenzalz. I'm dragging a transmitter along with me."

"I'm going to Gnesen in Warthegau."* And even more quietly added: "We are in a mess. You at least know Polish well, but what about me and my Polish accent with old mother Saxony sticking out a mile.... I told him: I can manage Bohemian... send me to Bohemia. But he was so scared he could hardly breathe... just drove off, the devil! There's no one to talk to. I hear the Russians will be here tomorrow. Well, let's go. Kraft is waiting for us in the next village with a car."

They went into the house, selected civilian clothes from the things lying about there and changed. Winckel wrapped his transmitter in a blanket. They left the village. The shattered remnants of regular troops were moving along the road in an endless stream. Cars hooted raucously, forcing aside the gloomy, trudging soldiers.

The soldiers took Winckel and Hauss for Poles. A Feldwebel even threatened to shoot them and ordered them off the road.

* Poznanshchina and Gniezno, renamed by the Germans.

"Spies," grumbled the Feldwebel, "I'll show you!"

Winckel was really scared. Of course they must excite suspicion. And if one of the soldiers started rummaging in the wheelbarrow and found the transmitter—they would shoot them down in a second, without listening to any explanations.

There were no traffic men on the road. Occasionally some officer or other would try to establish order, but nobody listened to him. Abandoned vehicles and guns cluttered the ditches. Further on, in a bomb crater, books were lying about—apparently the property of some fleeing propaganda company: Evangelical and Catholic prayer books, soldiers' calendars. One of these books was open, and a portrait of the Führer, smeared with mud, stared with wild eyes at the passing men. Winckel turned away.

The soldiers glowered at the passing lorries loaded with furniture, carpets, palms, plants—the property of Gauleiters, Kommandants and Sonderkommando chiefs, fleeing to the west. A dozen lorries went past, carrying the mahogany suites of some Gauleiter or other—of Doctor Hans Frank himself, they said. The wonderful carved cupboards, tables and wardrobes of the finest workmanship slowly became covered with wet snow. Big white, cackling geese stuck out their heads from under tables and chairs.

At a farm in the holy of holies R-Department of Headquarters where strangers were not allowed on pain of being shot, there was a crowd of people—commissariat officials, soldiers and hysterical, drunken women. A military brothel was being evacuated.

"Kraft can't have left?" said Hauss, going pale with terror.

Fortunately Kraft had not yet left. In the midst of the commotion he alone kept up a calm appearance. He was standing in front of the fireplace in his room and

burning mountains of papers towering round him. He nodded to the disguised officers and said:

"I'll send you off right now. The Russians are near."

He surveyed them critically, made a few remarks about their dress, and advised Hauss not to stick his chest out.

"Remember: you are a civilian now."

In answer to Hauss' complaint that he spoke Polish badly, he shrugged his shoulders and said grimly:

"Can't do anything about it. The order is to send you to Gnesen. I can't cancel it and all the chiefs have gone." After a pause he repeated: "The Russians are near."

"What do you think, will they soon be stopped?" asked Hauss. Kraft gave him a long look from his unblinking, pale eyes and said:

"Orders must be carried out.... Our fellows are beating the Americans in the Ardennes and suddenly there's a Russian offensive. Of unheard-of strength.... I, personally, thought that it would start in two weeks' time. There was information to that effect. The Bolsheviks got a move on: apparently they are coming to the rescue of the confused American troops...." He threw the last file of papers into the fire and asked: "Have you got enough money? Take this in case."

He gave them each a packet of marks and Polish zlote, then, after thinking for a moment, he said:

"But perhaps this money has already lost its value. Here are Russian rubles for you. They are forged but they have been so well done, you can hardly notice it."

In the meantime a huge blue bus had driven up to the house. It hooted insistently for Kraft. Kraft dressed and they went outside.

In the vehicle sat several men in civilian clothes whom Winckel did not know, and two non-commissioned officers in uniform, armed with sub-machine guns. The bus was filled with various sealed boxes. They could hardly

get the wheelbarrow with the transmitter inside, but Winkel would not part with it on any account. Finally the wheelbarrow was crammed on board and they set off.

It grew dark. Noises and piercing screams came from the road.

At midnight they drove through the town of Kutno where one of the civilians climbed out, after whispering to Kraft. In the town of Kolo another man left the bus. They crossed the river Warta. The crossing was packed with people and carts. They had to wait for over two hours. In the town of Konin they dropped yet another agent and then turned northwards. They drove all day. The road was jammed with retreating troops and refugees. Entire families of Germans were wandering along the ditches. On one stretch the bus overtook the lorry carrying Doctor Frank's mahogany furniture and white geese.

It was already late in the evening when they stopped not far from Hohenzalz. Now it was Winkel's turn. Kraft suggested that he should give up his military documents and destroy all letters in German and, in general, all traces of his past life. Winkel searched quickly through his pockets and said that everything was in order. Hauss shook hands with him. His hand was hot and it trembled. Winkel jumped out. His wheelbarrow was lowered after him. The bus started up immediately and soon vanished round a bend in the road. Winkel stood for a minute and then, pushing his wheelbarrow slowly forwards, he walked in the direction of Hohenzalz or rather Inowroclaw. From now on Winkel was obliged to call the town by its Polish name.

He felt afraid and uncertain. Relying on Poles these days was dangerous business. But there was no other way out. He was slightly reassured by the fact that there were many Germans and Poles on the road and that some of them were pushing almost the same kind of wheelbarrows as his own, so that he was not conspicuous among

them. Groups of German soldiers were also on the move but he could no longer turn to them for protection: he was Wladyslaw Walewski, a Warsaw broker, and nobody else. Neither could he go into the beautiful, comfortable restaurant beside a petrol station on the edge of the town, because on the door hung the forbidding notice: "Nur für Deutsche."

Anyway, he thought with a bitter grin, the Russians will soon arrive and liberate us from German oppression.

The streets were empty. Not without difficulty Winckel found the stone house he was looking for, with a grocer's shop on the ground floor. He knocked on the bolted shutters and waited. No one appeared.

Winckel again glanced at the signboard—yes, this was the house. "Sklep spożywczy Matuszewskiego." He knocked again on the window, this time louder and more insistently. At last a man's voice came distantly from the gate, asking in Polish:

"Co pan potrzebuje?"*

Winckel answered according to instructions that he had a letter "do pana Matuszewskiego" from pan Zabłudowski of Warsaw. The gate opened softly and Winckel pushed his wheelbarrow forward.

Matuszewski turned out to be a short, rather fat and talkative man. He was very frightened by what had happened and expressed no special pleasure at the arrival of "pan Wladyslaw Walewski." His bristling, grey moustache trembled at the slightest noise in the street, while his upper lip curled back, showing little sharp teeth, and his plump right hand flew up in warning. At such moments he reminded one of a field rat disturbed by the presence of somebody in the corn.

But as soon as the noise stopped, Matuszewski would begin chattering again, interspersing the story of his

* What does pan want?

family and his brother, who lived in London, with complaints about the weakness of the German army, about his unrealized hopes and about the inevitable arrival of the Russians.

"Ach-ach," he said, "what an unpleasant turn things have taken. . . . And what will be the end of it all, pan? . . ."

But he was overjoyed when he learned that Winckel had Soviet money. (Winckel, of course, did not tell him that it was forged.) He lodged the German in a little room under the attic. They put the transmitter in the attic among piles of hemp, barrels and old trunks.

Winckel-Walewski was introduced to a thin, coquettish old woman, pani Matuszewska, as a refugee from Warsaw. He had to tell her all he knew and much he did not know about the situation in Warsaw and the progress of the Russian troops. The master of the house tried to have his wife retire quickly into the bedroom and when he was alone again with Winckel he expounded his "political credo," as he pompously described it.

"I am a Pole," he said, "and there was much, yes, pan, much that disgusted me in what was done by the . . . mm . . . German gentlemen. The German policy, pan . . . er . . . Walewski, is not a very clever policy. It's not for love of you that I've taken you in, but from the highest political considerations, because, pan, communism is the scourge of God. I'll be perfectly frank with you . . . I share the views of the Krajowa Army to which I have the honour to belong. I listen to the 'Swit' radio station and am in complete agreement with the policy of General Sosnkowski . . . I am telling you quite frankly, pan . . . er . . . Walewski, quite frankly. I am not a Polish renegade, oh, no! My brother in London has some post in a branch of the government. Oh, no, pan, my brother is not the Minister Matuszewski, who is an extremely worthy man . . . oh, no! Pan Minister Matuszewski—he's my namesake, no more."

Winckel found Matuszewski's chatter extremely irritating but he was compelled to listen. The Pole's insolent frankness, impossible only a few days ago, showed how low the authority of Germany had fallen. Winckel could hardly restrain himself from quarrelling. But this was not the time. He sat with knitted brows and even tried to appear interested in what this Polish "politician" was saying. Forcing himself to listen to his host's chatter, Winckel thought of his own affairs: If only the army can dig in on the line Bromberg-Poznan-Breslau—then everything may yet be saved. . . . And he also thought: What a disgrace . . . running away like this! Like sheep. . . .

He went up to his little room and soon fell asleep.

At dawn he was awakened by hasty whispering. He saw Matuszewski. A large red banner fluttered in the Pole's hands.

"The Russians are in the town," he whispered. "Get up, pan. Get up and help me!"

"So soon? It can't be . . ." said Winckel amazed.

"It can't be!" mimicked Matuszewski angrily. "You warriors! . . . Get up . . . Help me, pan!"

He threw open the tiny window. A cold wind tore into the room, sweeping the cloth and calendar off the table. Clinging to a chair, Matuszewski nailed the red flag to the beam sticking out of the wall just below the attic window. The sound of his hammer echoed loudly through the empty street. Pan Matuszewski climbed off the chair and sighed heavily.

The red banner floated over the house.

XII

In the morning Winckel went for a walk round the town. He was able to gain a proper idea of the huge strength of the offensive. Tanks and first-class heavy artillery went past in an unending stream.

What was more, one did not have to be a great psychologist to read on the bronzed, weather-beaten faces of the infantry the real fighting spirit, true soldierly training. The soldiers did not march in close order, did not perform the goose step; there were neither fanfares nor drum-rolls, nor any outward smartness, nor the attitude of conquerors. The men marched on calmly, apparently without haste, just as men move who are doing a job that they know well. They looked with curiosity at the signboards and smiled slyly at the beautiful Polish women. Probably they would not have minded taking a rest, to have a chat and make love to the girls. But they did not stop anywhere; they went on and on towards the west. And Winckel felt with a shiver that there was no force on earth capable of stopping them.

One of the units went past with an unfurled banner.

On this banner Winckel saw the hammer and sickle and the five-pointed star—the communist or, as they said in Germany, “Marxist” emblems. He was accustomed to thinking of Communists as being definitely beyond the law. Small wonder. Since the year 1933, the word “communist” had been a terrible, forbidden word. Communists at large! Winckel could no more grasp such a conception than if someone had said: “The inhabitants of the moon are in Berlin.” But here they were! Communists at large! And not only at large but armed and invincibly strong and at the gates of the German Empire!

At midday Winckel returned home utterly exhausted. He was numb and hungry. Matuszewski met him in silence and only gave vent to an expressive cough. Soon there was a knock at the door and in front of them stood a tall young man, with a red and white armband. He greeted Matuszewski and the “refugee from Warsaw,” who was introduced to him by the master of the house, and informed them that there would be a town meeting on the square in an hour’s time.

Matuszewski, bowing and placing a fat hand on his waistcoat, thanked him for the information and assured the young man that he, Matuszewski, and his family would certainly take part in a meeting in honour of such a great and joyful event as the liberation of his native Inowroclaw from the villainous German invaders.

At this he looked maliciously at Winckel.

Winckel went to the meeting with Matuszewski.

A rejoicing crowd of people had already gathered on the square. Everywhere there were red-and-white and red flags. On the balcony of the town hall stood several Soviet and Polish officers.

A young but completely grey-haired Polish woman, who had just been freed from a German concentration camp, was speaking. The story she was telling was indeed terrible. The crowd grew ominously silent. Winckel stood still not daring to move. When the woman had finished her speech, a car and an armoured troop carrier drove into the square, hooting loudly. Soviet soldiers in steel helmets and carrying sub-machine guns stood in the carrier. An elderly Russian General stepped out of the car. Accompanied by two Russian officers and one Polish, he entered the town hall and soon appeared on the balcony.

The chairman of the meeting, a Pole, immediately asked him to speak. The name "Sizokrylov" meant nothing to the Poles but it was well known to the German agent.

The General began speaking. His clear loud voice resounded among the old houses. He congratulated the Poles on their liberation from the German yoke and promised the Polish population the friendly support and help of the Soviet Army.

The crowd reacted to the words of the General with a loud, excited roar. Winckel felt that someone was embracing him and kissing him heartily. He found himself

in the arms of an old Pole, then a young Polish woman embraced him and covered him with kisses. Hats and caps flew into the air.

Winckel, dazed and depressed, could hardly extricate himself from the crowd. Returning to Matuszewski he went quietly up to the attic. Here it was quiet, dark and smelt of dust and mice. Winckel lit his lantern and feverishly started tuning the transmitter. Now he would report that there were many Russian troops in the town and that General Sizokrylov was here. They would send up aircraft—and all this Inowroclaw including Matuszewski would go up into the air!

He began to tap the key, calling "Kaiserhof." Talk, singing and music came through on the ether. Soon his wave length started speaking but ... in Russian. Someone was persistently counting: "one, two, three, four, five..." Then it said: "Vanya, tuning."

"Kaiserhof" did not answer.

Winckel began searching for other wave lengths. From spasmodic bits of German conversation he gathered that the army was retreating in disorder. Someone asked somebody for help. "I am surrounded!"—shouted another station. "Zum Teufel!"* roared a third.

Winckel sat all night at the transmitter, then for another three nights and finally realized that it was no use. The low-powered transmitter had a range of only a hundred kilometres. Apparently the German army had gone out of—or rather run out of—the transmitter's range.

In the morning Winckel went downstairs. On opening the door into Matuszewski's flat he caught sight of two Russian officers and almost ran away, but then controlled himself. It turned out that the officers were simply billeted there. Having talked for a while politely with their hosts and the "refugee from Warsaw," they sat down to

* Go to hell!

play chess. Winckel stared fixedly at them. Their eyes were concentrated on the board, both of them were young, with steep, broad foreheads and calm, clever eyes. No, they were not like conquerors. They did not shout or boast, they did not try to overwhelm anyone with their superiority.

He asked what they thought of the prospects of the war. They both raised their eyes simultaneously from the chess-board, listened attentively to the Polish words, which they did not always understand, then one replied:

"The war will be over in the next few months."

"By the end of this year?" asked "Walewski."

"Of course," answered the Russian, sounding a little surprised at the question.

"Walewski" decided to express doubt about this, saying that the Germans were still very strong. Matuszewski threw fierce, warning glances at him and immediately assured the "pan officers" that the weakness of the Germans was obvious.

The Russians, however, agreed with "Walewski."

"They have got forces, and fairly strong ones," said one of them, "but we are stronger and, added to that, the Germans are demoralized."

"Excuse me?" asked "Walewski." He had not been able to understand the last word.

"Demoralized," repeated the Russian, making an eloquent gesture with his fist from his shoulder downwards.

Winckel left the room. Matuszewski jumped up and followed him. He whispered.

"You have gone mad, pan! . . . What did you say! You'll ruin us!"

"Shut up, you old fool," hissed Winckel and went up to his room.

What was he to do? Try to get through to Danzig, and home? His relatives had no doubt been evacuated to

Uncle Erich in Wittenberg. Try to get nearer to the front with the transmitter? A ridiculous idea: the Russian counterintelligence would catch him.

At last he decided. He would go to Szubin, to Richard Hanne. The Lieutenant had left earlier, when there was not such a rush. Possibly his transmitter would be more powerful and there would be other means of communication. Winckel knew this Lieutenant a little, although Headquarters did not allow agents to mix with each other too closely.

He went downstairs again. Matuszewski was in his shop. The "supporter of General Sosnkowski" had decided to re-open his shop, thus demonstrating his great pleasure at the arrival of the Russians and his loyalty to the new government—Krajowa Rada Narodowa. Dressed in a waterproof overall he was mincing to and fro between the barrels of salted herring and the barrel of kerosene. His wife was sitting alongside, selling flour and sausage at fantastic prices.

"I am going, pan," said Winckel.

Matuszewski fixed a pair of frightened, uncomprehending eyes on Winckel. Winckel explained loudly for the benefit of the customers:

"My heart is yearning for Warsaw.... Perhaps I'll manage to find one of my family...."

Matuszewski wiped his hands hurriedly on his apron and went out with Winckel into the back room, which was piled high with sacks and barrels. Winckel said that he would leave the transmitter here and go to another town on business. He might return. He asked Matuszewski to give him some food for the road. With every word Winckel spoke, Matuszewski's face grew brighter and brighter. He was so glad that he presented Winckel with a large packet of provisions—a loaf of white bread, sausage, a whole Dutch cheese and even a bottle of vodka.

Late in the evening Winckel softly opened the gates and went outside, pushing his wheelbarrow. He soon reached the highway. Wet snow was falling. From time to time he ran into columns of Poles, wandering home from various camps and from German farms and factories. Many had their families with them. The little children were sleeping in the arms of their fathers and mothers. There was a squeaking of cartwheels and bicycles. Even at night the road did not sleep. In the bushes near the ditch people were whispering, weeping and talking.

The wind rustled the trees. Winckel walked on trying not to think of anything. The thoughts passing through his head were cheerless and sad. Everything had turned out to be bluff—German greatness, German mission, German invincibility—where was he to go? Retire into private life—he thought, in the high-flown terms of the newspaper gossip columns. And probably millions of Germans are now thinking the same thing, he thought a minute later. Anyhow, what kind of a public figure was he? He had always thought only of himself. He had been told that a prosperous life was possible only if the Germans conquered Europe and built the New Order, which would ensure their power and importance. But what was power and importance? thought Winckel, as Ecclesiastes had thought before him. Dust and ashes, no more....

Tired from the long tramp, Winckel turned off the road into a wood, leaned against his wheelbarrow and dozed off. Soon he felt that there was somebody near him. Indeed, not far off some men were standing beside a large tree. There were three of them. They were dressed in ill-fitting civilian clothes, their faces were bearded. All three were staring steadily at the man with the wheelbarrow.

"What have you got there?" asked one of them hoarsely in German with such a typical Swabian accent that Winckel jumped with surprise.

He immediately realized that these were German soldiers, dressed in civilian clothes, who were making their way out of the Russian encirclement back to their own lines. Although he had no right to unmask himself, he was so overwhelmed with joy at the sight of his fellow countrymen that he decided to ignore this and exclaimed:

"I am also a German!"

Without answering a word one of them poked him in the chest with his fist, while another shoved him away from the wheelbarrow. They began to rummage among his belongings, grabbing one thing after another and looking round all the time towards the road. At last they came upon the provisions.

"What are you doing?" Winckel started grumbling. "I'm a German . . . I'm from Danzig. . . . I'm an Oberleutnant. . . . We are all . . . I'm breaking through, too. . . ."

They pushed the wheelbarrow away silently and vanished with it into the wood. Winckel stood up and limped along the road. Strange as it may seem, it was more difficult for him to go on without the wheelbarrow. It had given some purpose to his journey; pushing it had seemed an important task, it had distracted him from sad thoughts. Winckel groaned and almost wept with vexation.

It was already morning when he came across a group of Russian soldiers—apparently signallers, who were boiling porridge on a campfire. They called him and one of them asked with a glimpse of a smile:

"Are you cold? Who might you be?"

"Polish," answered Winckel scarcely audibly. "Wladyslaw Walewski from Warsaw."

"And what do you do?" asked another. "Worker, peasant or intellectual?"

Remembering the hammer and sickle, Winckel decided not to say that he was a real estate broker; he understood

that connection with "real estate" was no very high recommendation where Communists were concerned.

"Malarz,"* answered Winckel and to explain himself better, he waved his right hand in the air, as if he were wielding a brush.

"House painter!" said the third soldier joyfully, a tall strong man with flaxen hair. They all called him "Comrade Sergeant-Major," and he was apparently their leader.

"Hear that, boys? Seems he's a painter. Want a bite, painter? Sit down!"

Winckel sat down and ate hot meat and porridge.

"My uncle's a painter. A famous workman. Lives at Vologda. Ever heard of such a town—Vologda?"

"No," answered Winckel.

"Well, think of that!" the Sergeant complained jokingly. "Never heard of Vologda! Well, you'll know now! Ma-arvellous town! Mind you don't forget! You should know Russian towns because it's from those towns that we've come to help you. . . . Your heads are full of Berlin, Paris and London. . . . You know about those, don't you?"

"Yes," said Winckel.

"There you are," went on the companionable Sergeant. "And now you'll know Kostroma, Vologda . . . just like that!"

"Kostroma, Vologda," repeated Winckel.

They all laughed.

"And where are you going?" asked one of the soldiers.

Winckel explained that he was on his way to his sister at Bydgoszcz; she had a family and home there whereas his house had been destroyed and his family killed during the bombardment.

* Painter.

"Homeless," said one of the soldiers shaking his head. He had been silent until now. "How many of them are homeless now!"

Winckel stood up, took off his hat, bowed to the Russians and tramped on.

In the evening he arrived in Szubin.

XIII

Despite the late hour, the motor repair shop was working. Motors roared inside the large brick building. Polish workers and Russian soldiers were entering and leaving: apparently the shop was repairing Soviet military vehicles.

Seeing the soldiers Winckel did not dare to enter the workshop.

He sat down on a pile of bricks in the dark yard and waited. Soon the sound of the motors stopped and the workers began to come out one after the other through the illuminated rectangle of the doorway. Winckel stared closely at each of them fearing to miss Hanne. At last he caught sight of a lanky fellow dressed in overalls and recognized his voice. Hanne was talking excitedly to someone. Winckel's heart started beating as if he had seen his best friend, although he hardly knew Hanne.

Winckel caught up with him and said in a trembling voice:

"Hanne...."

Hanne stood as if rooted to the ground.

"Who are you?" he whispered in German.

Winckel gave his name.

They walked on silently along the dark street.

"Here," said Hanne making for the gates of a two-storied house.

Hanne's silence suddenly frightened Winckel. After the meeting with three of his fellow countrymen in the

wood, his faith in German solidarity was considerably shaken.

Hanne soon halted at a door, opened it with his key and they went in. The first thing that caught Winckel's eye was a rucksack lying on a chair, filled to bursting.

Hanne sat down on the bed and asked:

"Well?"

Winckel peered into Hanne's face, studying and judging it. What could he or couldn't he tell this man? Wouldn't it be better to state everything frankly and ask for advice? No, Winckel was afraid even in present circumstances to tell the truth.

Hanne also watched Winckel attentively. What had the Oberleutnant come for? Who had sent him? Had he come to test him? Hanne had firmly made up his mind to quit his post and to leave Szubin for the east. Surely Headquarters had not got wind of it? He glanced in alarm at the rucksack ready for the journey.

Winckel intercepted this glance and asked, as calmly as possible:

"Are you preparing to leave, Hanne?"

They've found out, the dirty swine! thought the Lieutenant. Now he'll ask where's the transmitter.... Hanne had thrown the transmitter piecemeal into a well as soon as the Russians arrived.

"I'm not going anywhere," he answered truculently. "What makes you think I am? ... Not everyone's capable of desertion."

They looked questioningly at each other. Do they know where I am going? thought Hanne, looking at Winckel with hatred. What did he say about desertion? thought Winckel in fright.

"To desert now," said Winckel quickly, "is doubly shameful.... The fatherland is in danger.... Enemies on all sides. Now we must support the Führer as never before."

Police swine, thought Hanne. He said: "Personally, I have no doubt of victory. Temporary reverses cannot break us."

Blockhead, SS scum! thought Winckel. I wouldn't put it past him to start singing the "Horst Wessel. . . ." Winckel said:

"Excellent then. . . . Where's your transmitter?"

They glowered at each other with dislike and fear. At last Hanne said very arrogantly:

"It's somewhere else. . . . Now I'll give you something to eat. You are probably hungry."

What shall I do? Where is there to go? thought Winckel. Why have I tied myself to this stupid fool of a boot-licker, who even now does not understand anything?

They both sat at the table chewing silently. Then Hanne jumped up and said:

"Oh yes, Winckel, I've got a little rum here."

He pulled a bottle out of the rucksack. Winckel drank gladly and began to feel sleepy. Hanne obligingly gave him his own bed and laid down on the divan.

Winckel woke up at dawn feeling cold. Neither Hanne, nor his overcoat, nor his rucksack were in the room. After waiting for half an hour, Winckel dressed and, looking round fearfully, left the house.

Thus began the wanderings of Winckel.

He wandered from village to village, nearer and nearer to the front line; he wandered without any kind of plan, simply trying to reach Germany. This was his only thought.

It was cold. In an empty house he found a woman's kerchief, wrapped it round his head and stuck his hat on over it. Glancing at the mirror he was glad of his stupid, wretched appearance, as it was unlikely to arouse any suspicion.

Winckel was now passing through those districts from which, at Hitler's order, almost all Poles had previously

been deported. The land was given to the German settlers, or, as they unambiguously called themselves, "colonizers," who had now fled to the west together with the German army. The villages were empty. Winckel went into the deserted houses and ate everything he found on the kitchen shelves and in the cellars. In one village he even made himself a store of provisions. After chasing a half-wild pig for nearly an hour he at last managed to catch and slaughter it with a kitchen knife he had found in one of the houses. He stuffed his pockets with the wet, slippery slices of pork.

The front had moved far to the west. The Russian supply columns stretched endlessly along the roads. For safety's sake Winckel, a dirty, bearded wreck, attached himself to one of the numerous Polish families returning to their former district. In spite of the hardship of the long journey on foot and the disgusting weather, the Poles were in an elated, joyful mood. Another stream of people also liberated by the Red Army was coming towards them—Russians, Ukrainians, Poles, Czechs, Serbs. As they passed they shouted cheerfully and exchanged news.

The road lived a tense, noisy and joyful life.

The Polish family which Winckel had joined was rather afraid of him, suspecting that he was a little out of his mind. He himself reinforced this conviction, mumbling into his beard and sighing heavily from time to time. The Poles would probably have tried to separate from him but he once hinted to them that he had spent a year and a half in Majdanek. Then they were very sympathetic, began to look after him, gave him the best food, and the eldest daughter, Jadwiga, even invited him to their place at Chodziej to have a rest and recover.

The head of the Marcynkiewicz family was a switchman on the railway. In 1941 he had been deported to the "governor-general's province" from the home where

he had lived all his life. Now the Marcynkiewicz family were returning home, happy and full of hope. They were pleasant, quiet people.

Early one morning when they were almost at their journey's end, a large column of armed German soldiers suddenly came out of the wood with an officer at their head.

Confusion reigned on the road. Everything stopped.

"Are the Russians far off?" asked the officer curtly, addressing the dumbfounded Poles.

The Poles were silent.

Winckel stood stock-still, then went quickly up to the Germans and said:

"A Russian wagon-train has just gone past. It turned to the right."

To Winckel's surprise the column of Germans went off quickly in the direction he had indicated. Winckel hesitated, then followed the Germans without even a glance at the Marcynkiewiczes, who were extremely surprised at the sudden talkativeness and excellent German of the "former inmate of Majdanek."

Apparently the Germans were short of food or ammunition and were going to attack the wagon-train. Winckel decided to reveal himself to the officer and make his way into Germany, not by himself but with this fairly large group of Germans.

In five minutes the Germans turned into a grove and sighted a long horse-train loaded with hay and boxes. Oldish Russian soldiers walked beside the carts, holding the long reins in their hands. There were not more than ten of them.

"Captain," said Winckel throwing off the stupefying numbness of the past days. "I am an officer of Army Group Headquarters...."

The officer looked at him uncomprehendingly. And suddenly Winckel saw both the officer and the soldiers

go forward in the direction of the cart drivers, with their arms raised. The Russians had already noticed the approach of the Germans and stopped.

Winckel stood stock-still in the middle of the road, trembling. He was about to disappear into the forest when one Russian soldier suddenly shouted at him:

"Hey you there!"

Winckel went nearer.

"Tell 'em to go up the road, where our control post is. They can give 'emselves up there. We've no time."

Winckel translated this hastily to one of the Germans and shot off into the roadside bushes.

After several days of confused and weary wandering Winckel found himself in a large forest. Along the clearings stretched concrete fortifications, communication trenches filled with fallen wood and rusty barbed-wire entanglements.

It was quiet in the forest. Evening was approaching, moonlit and comparatively warm. The pines rustled above the dugouts, pillboxes and trenches. It was clear that no one was defending these old fortifications. They were filled with the decaying smell of rotten grass, melting snow and damp.

Winckel lowered himself into a kind of dark rough-boarded dugout. Here it was damp but warm. Winckel went to sleep, leaning his head against the wall beneath an embrasure.

He awoke at dawn, shivering from the cold: he had a fever.

He hardly managed to climb out of the dugout and wandered through the forest, stumbling across more and more defence works. Suddenly he realized: he was on the much vaunted Eastern Wall, that very wall which was to have barred the path of the Russian armies to the heart of Germany. The Wall was several kilometres deep. The pines rustled above it, scattering wet snow on to

the concrete fortifications. The Germans had not even had time to give battle here; they were racing further and further back—to the Oder, to Berlin.

Winckel wandered stumbling through the forest.

He soon found himself in the German village, where, in the house with the clocks, he met Lubentsov. When he was sure the Russians had gone the German ex-spy lay down again and buried his face in the pillow.

XIV

After leaving the house with the clocks, Lubentsov took a lift in a passing car to the Divisional Commander, who was impatiently awaiting his return. The General was very eager to know if the member of the Military Council had said anything about him or his division, and what in particular.

Taras Petrovich Sereda often pretended that he was not concerned about the opinion of his superiors: he was a soldier, and was not fighting for the sake of praise. But this only lightly masked a constant, jealous and guarded interest in the opinion of highly-placed officers concerning himself and his division.

The Chief of the Political Department, Colonel Plotnikov, often made a joke of this weakness of the Divisional Commander's.

Plotnikov had been a civilian before the war. He had graduated from the Red Professorial Institute and later worked as the Chief of the Political Department of an MTS* in the Kuban, and later, having obtained the degree of Master of Philosophical Sciences, taught dialectical materialism at Kharkov University. In spite of this—or perhaps just because of this—he was very simple in his manner.

* Machine and tractor station.

Plotnikov was assigned to General Sereda as Chief of the Political Department in 1942. The General was not particularly overjoyed when he discovered that they were sending him a "philosopher" and one who had never been under fire at that.

But on meeting not the expected pedant but a wise political worker, an excellent propagandist, able to expound the most difficult questions in simple and understandable language, the General realized his mistake. Apart from this he soon discovered that the Colonel was brave and, what was more, cheerfully brave, without straining himself. Bravery was no trifling virtue to the General, who was a fighting man to the core.

Plotnikov studied the art of warfare from the beginning of the war as methodically as everything else. He copied out long excerpts of the "Field Manual" in his clear handwriting, mastered the tactical and technical possibilities of air, artillery and tank forces. And as far as actual political work was concerned he was a "god," as Sereda put it admiringly.

The two former workers, one who had become a general, the other a scholar, lived on friendly terms and worked well together. This did not however prevent "the junior in rank" from frequently checking the "junior in knowledge," as they sometimes called each other jokingly when they were left alone. The fact of the matter was that the "junior in knowledge," General Sereda, was quite often carried away by "divisional patriotism," and would try either to lure the best surgeons, officers and quartermasters out of other divisions, or to snatch a prisoner already captured by his neighbours. If his own men committed any fault, he reprimanded them severely, but tried to do it quietly in order not to "disgrace the family."

The division loved General Sereda. His subordinates spoke with delight of his understanding of people, won-

derful bravery under any circumstances, gruff but pointed humour and even about his curling black moustache, which he cherished lovingly.

"What's holding up that Lubentsov?" asked the General looking at his watch.

"Ah, burning with curiosity?" suggested Plotnikov slyly.

"Yes," the General confessed.

In the next room Vika was busy with an open suitcase. She was preparing to leave for the second echelon. She was very reluctant to go. The girl had acquired the slightly contemptuous attitude towards the rear, common among staff officers, although the division's rear installations were situated quite near to the front line. The General had offered her a choice: to live either at the divisional newspaper, or at Rear Headquarters with Major of the Commissariat Service Astakhova.

After thinking a while, Vika chose the newspaper. War correspondents were after all better than commissariat clerks. All the more so since there was a fine woman, a former sniper, working there as compositor and chief of the printing department. They decided to live together.

Vika's passionate requests to be left with Headquarters were in vain. Taras Petrovich was very particular about carrying out orders from above. He could not ignore the direct instruction of the member of the Military Council, although he knew well that General Sizokrylov would not check on the carrying out of this order.

Sereda, raising his voice, asked Vika severely again and again:

"Soon be ready?"

"In a moment."

At last Lubentsov appeared.

"We shall be taking Schneidemühl," he said, breaking the main news at once. "The member of the Military

Council expects that the Germans will defend the town properly. It's a fortress of the Eastern Wall."

The Divisional Commander quickly summoned the Chief of Staff and the Artillery Commander, made contact with the corps and rang up the regiments. In a word, there began the usual businesslike fuss common to such occasions, which gladdens every officer's heart. The corps confirmed that the division's task was changing and that its sector of attack would be moving more to the left, to Schneidemühl. An hour later a corresponding written order arrived from the corps. The commanders of the regiments, and of attached units assigned to the division, arrived.

To the division were attached an anti-tank regiment, an artillery regiment of the High Command reserve, a Guards mortar battalion and a regiment of self-propelled artillery. The commanders of these units had behind them dozens of guns of huge destructive power, a sea of fire. But they were quiet, calm, polite people. Looking at them, the Divisional Commander mentally calculated the possibilities of each man of this fire-breathing company: this colonel had so many guns, that major—so many, and in all, these men would fire so many rounds a minute.

After allotting these forces to the regiments, leaving at his own disposal the "Katyushas" and, as an anti-tank reserve, the self-propelled regiment, the General rose. All the others followed him.

"I am sorry for you, comrades," said the General. "You are being held up at Schneidemühl while other units move on to Berlin. But what can you do about it? Instead of drawing back his troops across the Oder to defend his capital, Hitler is shutting up forces in the towns. Poznan, Breslau, and now Schneidemühl.... Well then, it's in our interests to finish off this fortress as quickly as possible. I wish you success!"

Vika slipped away with Lubentsov to go to the scouts. On the way she told him that a radiogram had arrived the night before from Meshchersky's group. Everything was all right there and it seemed that he had even taken a prisoner.

Vika treated the Guards Major with special affection. She liked his gay blue eyes, his courage and resourcefulness, but above all—his fascinating "stories," as she called Lubentsov's reports to the Divisional Commander. He always talked about the Germans, about their complicated manoeuvres and intentions, studding his reports with the queer titles of the German divisions and the strange-sounding names of the prisoners. In particular the title of one division, the "Dead Head," had stuck in her mind.

"Where is it now?" asked Vika.

"In Hungary," answered the Guards Major absently.

In the scouts' hut it was quiet, as it usually is with scouts when a group is operating in the rear of the enemy. The soldiers had gathered in a big room and were listening in silence to the muffled noise and screeching behind the closed door of the next room. There the highest regarded job of reconnaissance was in operation—radio communication with the reconnaissance party operating in the German rear.

The scouts were alarmed. Meshchersky had transmitted his first radiogram at 3.45 and had promised to make contact again with the division's transmitter at 8.00. It was already past eight, but "Stream" (Meshchersky's call-sign) had made no response.

Seeing the Guards Major come in, the scouts sighed in relief, as if it were in Lubentsov's power to make Meshchersky call up.

Meshchersky did not respond until midday. Sitting with earphones on, Voronin suddenly flushed to the roots of his hair with excitement.

"Is he talking?" asked Lubentsov.

"'Stream'! 'Stream'!" cried Voronin nodding his head joyfully. "This is 'Sea'! I can hear you well!..."

Lubentsov quickly took his place at the transmitter and recognized Meshchersky's voice. The Captain reported that the Germans were proceeding along the road to Schneidemühl ("Point 8-b"). Medium artillery, twenty tanks, two battalions of infantry had passed. Along the river Küddow, south of the town, there was infantry in trenches.

"'Stream'! 'Stream'! This is 'Sea'!" said Lubentsov. "You have carried out your mission. Go to sector sixteen, right upper corner, and wait for us there. Don't forget about the signals."

"Right upper corner, sector sixteen" was a big marshy wood, eight kilometres northeast of Schneidemühl.

"Well, that's all!" cried Voronin delightedly.

"It's not all," said Lubentsov, worriedly. "Our artillery and regiments must be warned.... They might take Meshchersky's group for Germans and kill them all in the darkness and confusion. Let's go to Headquarters!"

Headquarters, however, was no longer in the village—at the Divisional Commander's order it had moved further west. Lubentsov drove off to catch up with it.

XV

In the two-storied house of the post office where the division had made its headquarters, everything was upside down. The floor and the counters were littered with seals, wrappers, folders, whole sheaves of letters, long ribbons of postage stamps bearing the portraits of Hitler and Hindenburg, and piles of copper coins.

Oganesyan roamed about the telephone exchange, pushed the plugs into their sockets and jokingly called up unknown subscribers:

"Hullo! Hullo!"

But the telephones, abandoned by their owners, were silent.

Most interesting of all were the bundles of fresh newspapers. Among them was yesterday's *Völkischer Beobachter*. Yesterday's Berlin papers! They still smelt of printer's ink and in them were the very latest howls of Goebbels and Ley, fresh from their lips, as it were!

This article on the first page, for instance, had been written by Goebbels only two days ago. Goebbels, who until now had existed in the mind of every soldier not as a living man but as the abstract personification of Nazi falsehood and treachery, was now becoming a tangible, concrete enemy.

The howls of despair were already coming not from captured Germans but from the primary source itself. Even Hitler, it seemed to Lubentsov, was about to raise his hands and shout the famous words: "Hitler Kaput!"

Meanwhile, a new party of prisoners was brought in and Oganesyan began questioning them in one of the upper rooms, the bedroom of the former postmaster who had fled. Most of the prisoners had nothing new to tell. They belonged to demolished units of the powerful force, "Vistula," now almost completely destroyed, which was under the command of the brand new army leader, Heinrich Himmler.

In the course of the war Oganesyan had become thoroughly bored with prisoners but on meeting a soldier from the 73rd German Infantry Division, he would at once liven up, squint his eyes and smile—with such a soldier he could talk all day!

The 73rd Infantry Division was his weakness, an object of special interest and special hatred to Oganesyan.

He had but to learn of the capture of somebody from the 73rd and he would rush off to the cross-questioning, sacrificing even sleep—and he loved sleep.

Called up into the army as an interpreter in April, 1942, Oganessian found himself in a rifle division fighting in the vicinity of Kerch. He had not even received a military uniform when the Germans supported by swarms of aircraft began to advance.

Even now, after three years, deep anger flared in Oganessian's black eyes at the memory of those days.

Thousands of people were crammed together on a tiny strip of land along the Strait. The sky was black with German aircraft and the beach was turned into a single, black crater by the bombing. But meanwhile Nature pursued her normal round. Wonderful summer weather had set in. The surf broke on to the beach in white foam. German bombs were bursting all round but the seagulls thought that it was a storm and cried as seagulls usually cry during storms.

An unforgettable crossing began. On boats, launches, barrels and improvised rafts men crossed over to the coveted Caucasian shore.

When the Germans pressed too close and their shouts became audible, our soldiers would throw themselves furiously at the enemy without waiting for orders. This terrified the Germans and they would retreat. Our men then returned to their stations by the blue sea's edge to wait for their turn in the boats to come round. And in their turn the usual horde of German "J-87" dive bombers would appear in the blue sky.

It was then that Oganessian's first prisoner was brought to him. He was a tall, somewhat tipsy German, who carried himself with defiant insolence. Apparently he was not a little surprised when a civilian standing among the officers, in a blue suit spattered with mud and clay, with a silk tie hanging awry, his chin blue-black

with several days' growth of beard, began to question him in the purest literary "hochdeutsch."

Amazed by Oganesyanyan's excellent command of the German language, the prisoner answered his questions with a certain respect. He was from the 73rd Infantry Division and said boastfully that it was this division which had broken through the front so rapidly and hurled the Russians back towards the Strait.

"Charge me," he said, "to inform the command of your agreement to surrender. Honourable capitulation. We are amazed at your bravery."

Thus spoke this rotten, half-drunk Hitlerite, playing the part of an angel of mercy and peacemaker.

Oganesyanyan trembled and began to unfasten the holster of a captain standing beside him. (He himself had no pistol then.) But although he felt like it, he did not shoot and only shouted very loudly and gutturally some incomprehensible oath in his native tongue, Armenian.

Oganesyanyan met the 73rd Division again at the end of 1944. It was taking part in the defence north of Warsaw, in the area between the rivers Bug, Narev and Vistula. Lubentsov, knowing the good-naturedness and the lazy, melancholy disposition of his interpreter, was surprised at Oganesyanyan's behaviour at that time. Only burning hatred could thus change this man.

When he received the first prisoner, Oganesyanyan surveyed him for a long time, baring his uneven teeth, stained yellow with makhorka, in an evil smile.

"Where were you in '42?"

"In the beginning I was at Kerch..." began the prisoner and suddenly trembled as he saw the distorted face of the interpreter.

When they had taken the prisoner away and Oganesyanyan had become his usual kind, pleasant, and somewhat eccentric self, he told Lubentsov the story of his acquaintance with the German 73rd Infantry Division.

"What a suit I lost! What a tie!" he exclaimed as if that were the main thing. "I crossed on a barrel and my clothes were washed away by a wave.... Perhaps they're still floating about there."

Lubentsov did not smile at the humorous ending given to this terrible story.

"Well, we'll wait a bit," he said. "As far as I can understand the situation your 73rd will be meeting its end in a few days."

The 73rd Infantry Division was, in fact, smashed to pieces near Warsaw. Its soldiers scattered in all directions, abandoning their arms; the whole of its artillery regiment was taken prisoner. More than once Oganessian met prisoners from this division. But although he felt himself fully revenged for the Kerch days, he always questioned soldiers of the 73rd for a long time and very closely, relishing the details of the defeat and trying to squeeze out the last drop of information about the regiments, battalions and even individual officers whose names he knew. And he knew everything about the 73rd Division!

Now, unexpectedly two more soldiers from this division appeared before him. He began to question them, sneering maliciously as usual and cutting in with details which surprised them.

When one of them—a lanky young German with a mop of ginger hair—was asked by the interpreter how he had been taken prisoner, he answered that a Russian soldier had caught him and his comrade at a remote manor house where they were hiding and preparing to change into civilian clothes to make their way home.

"Ask him where his home is," said Lubentsov. Oganessian asked and received the answer:

"Schneidemühl."

Lubentsov started. That was a piece of luck. He was even surprised that Oganessian took the German's answer

so calmly. But of course! Here the interpreter ended and the scout began.

Lubentsov sent the other Germans to the assembly point for prisoners of war, and with the interpreter's help began to cross-question the Germans from Schneidemühl in detail and at great length.

The prisoners gave the following information:

The town of Schneidemühl, in Polish it was known as Pila, stood on the river Küddow. Through it passed "Reich highway No. 160" leading to the Baltic Sea and Kolberg, "Reich highway No. 104" which extends through Stettin to Lübeck in the province of Hannover, and just to the west "Reich highway No. 1"—to Berlin and further to Magdeburg, Braunschweig, Dortmund, Essen, Düsseldorf and Aachen.

The German with the ginger mop, who turned out to be a driver, especially praised this last Reich highway."

"This road," he recounted, smugly, like a contractor presenting a road he has built to its owner, "is well asphalted and extremely well kept. It will take you to Berlin, straight to the centre, to the Alexanderplatz. From Schneidemühl to Berlin it is exactly two hundred and forty kilometres. Three hours' good driving in a car."

Lubentsov could not but smile at these hospitable words from the German. The German driver, feeling himself on his home ground, began to roll his eyes and went on in the admiring tone of a guidebook:

"Highway No. 1 is the longest in Germany and with the exception of the super-highway it is the best kept. . . . It stretches far, far, to the very frontier of Belgium. . . ."

"And how far is that?" asked Lubentsov.

"Over eight hundred kilometres."

Lubentsov burst out laughing. To him, who came from the Far East, this infinitesimal distance seemed a mere joke. From frontier to frontier—eight hundred kilometres! He remembered the distances in the Amur district,

where thousands of kilometres were considered a stone's throw. He also remembered about the "green street," almost four thousand kilometres in length, of which he had heard yesterday from the Tank-General.

"Well, all right, back to business," he said at last. "Let them tell us about Schneidemühl."

The prisoners began to tell.

The town was surrounded on the east and the south by a forest strip, the "Stadtforst." Yes, they knew where the old fortresses were. One, the biggest, was situated about fifteen kilometres to the east of the town. There were trenches there. Five kilometres to the south there was another fort "Walter." Between the forts there were old concrete machine-gun posts. True, they were rather neglected, overgrown with grass and flowers. Children often played in them. After all the frontier had been moved far away to the east! The forest was full of lakes and streams flowing into the Küddow.

The prisoners carefully put down their information on a plan, explaining every line in detail.

As for the town itself, it was an ordinary town with barracks, saw mills, a memorial to Frederick, King of Prussia, rope factories and old churches. One prisoner lived on the Hindenburgplatz in the centre and the other on the Berlinerstrasse on the western outskirts. They had relatives there, namely....

"I understand," said Lubentsov. "Ask them about the river, what's the river like? We shall have to force a crossing."

The river Küddow was not a big river but fairly deep, a tributary of the Netze. It flowed round the town on the southeast and divided it into unequal parts: the smaller to the east, the larger to the west. It was a peaceful river with a sandy bottom and sloping banks. There were swimming pools, boathouses....

"All right," grinned Lubentsov.

One of the Germans said:

"Perhaps there's a map of the town in the post office. After all, Schneidemühl is the centre of the region."

There was in fact a map, and feverish work began in the postmaster's rooms. A topographer and a draughtsman set to work to make copies of the map for the regiments. Oganessian translated into Russian the names of the streets, squares, industrial and public buildings.

Lubentsov was content and thought tenderly of that unknown Russian soldier who had caught these two Schneidemühl German in the remote manor house.

XVI

An hour later the Chief of the Army Reconnaissance Department, Colonel Malyshev, rang up.

On learning that Lubentsov had a detailed map of Schneidemühl, the Colonel ordered him to supply each of the divisions about to assault the town with a copy of it. Lubentsov went to Headquarters to find out which divisions were involved and where they were stationed. Here he learnt that Colonel Vorobyov's units would attack Schneidemühl from the east. Sereda's division had been ordered to by-pass the town on the north and occupy positions along the western outskirts.

Vorobyov's men, the officer on duty told him, had already engaged the enemy to the east of the town. Artillery fire could, in fact, be heard in the distance and flames glowed on the horizon.

Thus Lubentsov and Tanya would be separated by the besieged German town. What of it? A mere trifle for the loving heart of a scout!

And yet Colonel Malyshev's order about handing the map of the town to their neighbours presented an opportunity of meeting Tanya before Schneidemühl was

taken. After all, it would not matter if Lubentsov himself went to Colonel Vorobyov's to hand in the map. Nevertheless, this errand did not seem to him to be quite plausible: if Tanya had not been there he would not even have thought of taking the map himself. He could have sent Antonyuk or somebody else.

General Sereda was very pleased that his scouts had stolen a march on Vorobyov's scouts and were now giving them help.

"Give Vorobyov my regards," said Sereda, grinning and twisting his moustaches. "And ask him if he needs something else perhaps. Tell him just to hold the Germans a little more firmly and we will take the town!..."

Lubentsov ordered the horses to be saddled, took a "peacetime" dress cap with a purple band out of his suitcase, put it on and, accompanied by Chibiryov, rode his black Orlik at a sharp trot towards Schneidemühl. The riders soon turned off down a side road and found themselves in a big forest. Lubentsov was thinking of Tanya and of how only her presence here could allay his vexation at the Schneidemühl delay, while other divisions and armies were going on to the west, nearer and nearer to Berlin, behind the tank formations which were smashing the fortified German defences.

Colonel Vorobyov's division was famous in the army for its offensive spirit. It had been created from a nucleus of frontier units and its officers were all former frontier guards. The men were proud of this. It was a strong and tested division, stubborn in defence and rapid in attack. Vorobyov himself, an old Cheka frontier guard, could not bring himself to part with the frontier uniform and its cap with the bright green top.

Vorobyov examined the map of the town and forts for a long time. He had been expecting this map: in the army everything becomes known quickly.

"Well, thank you," he said. "This thing is not bad. And tell Sereda to stand firm on the western outskirts and I will strike here with my frontier men...."

Lubentsov smiled: his own Divisional Commander had said the same thing!

Then he went to see his colleagues. Chibiryov followed behind, leading the horses by the bridle. Among other things Lubentsov asked the scouts the whereabouts of their Medical Battalion. In so doing he complained of a toothache and screwed up his face, as if in pain.

"Our Medical Battalion is a good way behind," he explained.

Smiling at his own subterfuge and avoiding Chibiryov's glances, the Major galloped off to the Medical Battalion. Chibiryov was, as usual, imperturbable: he was accustomed not to ask idle questions, and rode along beside his chief like a shadow.

The Medical Battalion was situated in a big village hidden in the Schneidemühl "Stadtforst."

Gaily, although slightly embarrassed and this time not even looking in Chibiryov's direction, he asked a passing nurse where he might find Captain of the Medical Service Tatyana Vladimirovna Koltsova. On seeing a smiling blue-eyed major mounted on a beautiful, raven-black steed, the nurse answered coquettishly and with unconcealed curiosity:

"She left not long ago.... Any message?"

And either from a desire to spite the other woman, or to put the nice horseman on his guard, she added wickedly:

"She often goes out in the evenings."

"I see," said Lubentsov mechanically, still smiling.

"A car comes for her...."

"I see," repeated Lubentsov, but the smile vanished from his face and he reined in his horse so that it reared up on its hind legs.

Nodding to the startled nurse, he galloped off whence he had come. Chibiryov rode after him but soon lagged behind.

When he had calmed down a little, Lubentsov reined in the horse and slapped its neck, asking loudly:

"And you, old beggar, what are you to blame for?"

"... 'eggar ... 'ame for ..." answered the echo in the forest.

"It's a German echo but it speaks Russian," murmured Lubentsov to himself, smiling once again.

From the west there came a rumble of artillery. Hearing these familiar and unpleasant sounds the horse pricked up his ears and trotted on. It was drizzling either snow or rain, damp and horrible.

Lubentsov soon came out on to the vaunted "Reich highway No. 1," along which Soviet troops were now thundering. A heavy artillery regiment went past with all its motor transport hooting. Anti-tank guns went bouncing by, and also a brigade of sappers with collapsible pontoons. Then lorries with guards mortars passed slowly, hugging the verge. The men looked with commiseration at the wet, tired infantry making their way along the other edge of the road: all felt that fate had been unkind to the divisions held up at Schneidemühl.

An artillery major drove up to Lubentsov in his car.

"What's up, you've stopped at Schneidemühl? You're in for trouble I think."

Noticing the gloomy distracted face of the infantry major, he interpreted it in his own way and ended, even a little guiltily:

"But perhaps we shall be held up on the Oder...."

Lubentsov did not even laugh at this queer effort to comfort him. Then the artilleryman drove off and Lubentsov went in search of his division. He saw Lieutenant Nikolsky coming towards him, wet and bedraggled. The Lieutenant was at the head of the signallers,

laying the divisional telephone line. When he saw Lubentsov he at once burst out with news:

"Do you know what, Comrade Major of the Guards, we are going to assault Schneidemühl!..."

"I know," replied Lubentsov. "Where is Headquarters?"

"Follow the telephone wires and they'll take you to Headquarters."

"Has Meshchersky come back?"

"He's back and has brought in some prisoners."

Lubentsov soon rode into a village. Here, in one of the streets, he suddenly halted his horse. He had seen a house—not quite a house, but a big grey brick barn, like a garage—with the same kind of wide, double door. There was a small window in this door. Three lines of barbed wire, instead of a fence, stretched round the house and far into the surrounding allotments. It was fixed to firm, oak stakes and woven crisscross between them. All along this unusual fence, at intervals of ten to twenty metres apart, stood low, square, wooden towers with triangular roofs.

The huge yard surrounded with barbed wire and towers was strewn with garbage and scraps of paper. All of it together—the grey house without windows, the yard, the rusty barbed wire and the watchtowers—was a loathsome and terrible sight.

Lubentsov dismounted, handed the bridle to Chibiryov, and walked slowly into the house. The cement floor was covered with straw. It was lying in rows which still retained the impressions of human bodies. On the walls were scratched inscriptions in Russian and Ukrainian, outpourings from the souls of captive people, full of despair and hope.

No, this was not a concentration camp. It was simply quarters for Russian prisoners of war and slaves, driven here to work in the fields of the village, and

hurriedly driven away not long before the arrival of the Red Army. This was not a Majdanek, but an ordinary camp for "eastern workers."

Most terrible of all, the grey house with its fence and towers stood in a line with other houses of the village. To its right there was also a house, but without barbed wire—a simple, small, white-painted house with a cock crowing in the yard. On the left stood a grey cottage with curtains at the windows. True, the villagers had fled from here. But surely they were here a few days ago. Why, these people had been peacefully planting cabbages and turnips in the allotments just next to this barbed-wire fence. And opposite as well, there were houses—simple village living houses.

Lubentsov left the barn, jumped on his horse and soon reached the scouts. Here he took off his "peacetime" dress cap with the purple band, thrust it angrily into the suitcase, threw off his greatcoat, put on a field cap, a padded jacket, tightened his belt, put a pistol in his pocket and glancing at the scouts who had formed up in front of him in the yard, said:

"Now boys, let's go to take Schneidemühl! The war goes on. And I am always travelling about—now to Army Headquarters, now to the chief, now to God knows where!"

Meanwhile Oganessian questioned the prisoners taken by Meshchersky. There was no one from the 73rd Infantry Division but he questioned the Germans thoroughly, for Lubentsov had ordered him to find out the exact identity of the enemy units in the fortress of Schneidemühl.

The most valuable information was given by a huge, dirty fellow who turned out to be the orderly of the commander of the German fortress battalion. In the town, according to him, were stationed: the Bromberg Cavalry Training School, the 23rd Naval Detachment, two fortress machine-gun battalions with ten battalions of

Volkssturm, some kind of security regiment and a tank unit.

At every phrase the prisoner moaned, sighed and waved his hand—this degraded German who had lost faith in everything, dismissed everything with a wave of his hand.

"Oh, yes," he said, "Himmler was here!" he waved his hand at Himmler as much as to say: "'What can Himmler do here?'—Yes, five days ago, Himmler was here, he appointed Lieutenant-Colonel of the SS, Remmlinger, chief of the town defence,"—the German again waved his hand. "What the hell could Remmlinger do here?"

Oganesyan then put a question which had long ago become stereotyped: "Why do you go on resisting?"

The German sighed. "Orders are orders..." and he waved his hand this time at himself, and at his comrades whom the Nazis were compelling to fight, although it was plain to everyone that there was no sense in doing so.

Lubentsov ordered Antonyuk to inform the Divisional Commander and Malyshev of all the details, and went to the scouts in the advanced positions.

The enemy was in the east—for the second time during the war. The first time had been near Moscow, when Lubentsov was breaking his way out of encirclement. Remembering that encirclement, Lubentsov again thought of Tanya.

"Are you married?" he asked Sergeant-Major Voronin, who was walking beside him in silence.

"No," grinned Voronin, "didn't have time. I'll get married just as soon as we take Berlin and I go home."

"So it's as urgent as all that?!" Lubentsov said, jokingly. "And have you someone in mind?"

"Why of course!" answered Voronin. "Who hasn't got someone in mind? I shall go home, enquire, of course,

how she's been living there... M-yes ... I've got a scout there," he winked craftily, "my sister is a turner in the same factory.... She sends me letters telling me everything she knows about my Katya.... How she is and who she is with ... in a word, everything."

"But that's awful," said Lubentsov grimly. "They might say anything about her and you would go and believe it straightaway?"

"Why straightaway?" answered Voronin, rather surprised at the Major's heat. "Only a fool would believe straightaway...." He paused, then said seriously: "My Katya is a good girl ... I have faith in her.... And have *you* got someone in mind?"

Lubentsov shot a glance at the silent Chibiryov on his left and said:

"I haven't anyone."

A mine exploded not far off. Lubentsov said:

"There, you see? It's early to start thinking about a wife."

They entered a village, on the edge of which stood a lone tower. Why was this tower built here? Was it for decoration, as a relic of the distant past, or had it once served as a bell tower?—whatever the case, Lubentsov was quick to realize its advantages, and decided to make this the Divisional Commander's observation post. He mounted the spiral staircase and looked through his binoculars. Before him stretched the town, blanketed with the bluish haze of damp fog. Wet red tiles on the roofs; to the right—a station; to the left—the smokeless chimneys of a large factory. Lubentsov sent one of his scouts with a report to Headquarters and went on with the rest. They passed soldiers digging trenches, new artillery positions, mortars mounted in a hollow, and steaming field kitchens. Soldiers bustled about everywhere, trying to make themselves comfortable, lighted campfires, and, despite a terrible fatigue, after three weeks of continuous

offensive, cursed this town for stopping their advance on Berlin.

It was rather like the trench warfare which they had almost forgotten since the offensive began. The scouts went along the communication trench, now stepping over a sleeping soldier, now jumping over a heap of earth in an unfinished part of the trench.

Lubentsov walked along the front and talked with commanders of companies and platoons, with soldiers—mainly with machine gunners and snipers—with regimental scouts, with sappers and artillery observers, questioning them in detail about everything they had noticed. He put down the information on a map and made a sketch of what had been observed. He tried to do everything as carefully as possible. The regiments would be thrown into the attack at dawn, and he had therefore to get to know the general nature of the German defence system as thoroughly as possible, and also the location of German firing points and artificial obstructions. Moreover, he had to forget Tanya and he did try conscientiously to forget about her. True, sometimes when listening to the commanders, he caught himself thinking of his "old acquaintance." At such moments he frowned grimly and remembered General Sizokrylov. The stern, calm face of the member of the Military Council stuck in his mind and this recollection urged him on and made him concentrate only on his work.

He moved along the front of the division from south to north, and the map of the town was gradually filled up with symbols indicating German guns, tanks, machine-gun posts, barbed wire and mine fields.

And then he was forced to think about Tanya once again. In a dugout, at a machine-gun embrasure, he bumped into his fellow traveller—the "owner" of the famous carriage, Captain Chokhov.

Captain Chokhov was very surprised to see the "nat-ty" major in a padded jacket with two grenades at his belt, at the head of the division scouts. He was even more surprised when he learnt that this major was the famous, daring and invariably successful Lubentsov, the division reconnaissance officer about whom he had often heard from the soldiers.

Chokhov was embarrassed. So was Lubentsov, but for quite another reason: the whole world, it seemed, was conspiring to remind him of that Koltsova! He frowned and said:

"So we meet again! Well, tell me what you have seen in the German positions...."

Chokhov told him in a few words. He pointed out on the map—Lubentsov's map, which to the Major's satisfaction had already reached the commanders of the rifle companies—the disposition of firing points which he and his men had noted.

While Lubentsov transferred Chokhov's information to his own map, the Captain watched the Major of the Guards. A correct profile, a slightly up-turned nose, well-shaped lips—now tightly compressed—high clear forehead and fair hair. Something akin to envy stirred in Chokhov's soul—not so much because of Lubentsov's fame but of a distinctly felt mental clarity, free of any kind of ostentatiousness.

Lubentsov folded up his map and said:

"Let's go and see what we can observe!"

Quietly and insistently, one of the scouts said:

"You need some sleep, Comrade Major of the Guards. How many nights have you gone without sleep?"

"That's right," another supported him. "We'll keep watch ourselves."

"I have already slept," retorted Lubentsov.

"When?" asked the first scout. "We didn't notice it, somehow...."

"I slept on the way from Army Headquarters," said Lubentsov and immediately blushed, remembering that there was a witness here of his "watch" with Tanya, the night before last. He added quickly: "In the car, when I was travelling with the member of the Military Council, I dozed...."

"You have not slept, Comrade Major of the Guards." It was a squarefaced scout who complained.

"Drop it, Chibiryov," Lubentsov interrupted him, "let's go. Are you coming with us?" he asked Chokhov.

Chokhov went out with the scouts. Snow that was half rain lashed down, "fascist rain," as the soldiers called it. The trench cut across a mound. They all stopped on the east side of it.

"This is a good place," said Chokhov. Lubentsov looked through his binoculars and said, slightly reproachfully to Chokhov:

"You've dug in a long way from the Germans...."

There were soldiers sitting in the trench. They were talking. Lubentsov listened. A black-moustached sergeant was apparently giving a political talk. He was standing behind a machine gun looking into the grey blanket of fog in front of the trench and speaking at the same time, now and then turning his head towards the soldiers, who were listening attentively.

"... So Hitler called himself a Socialist but didn't lay a finger on the owners. We understand that of course: the fascists are the watchdogs of the capitalists. But all the same, why did Hitler call himself a Socialist? Because socialism is a right idea, progressive, it's in the workers' blood; the working man can't give it up. And he wouldn't have followed Hitler if he had not been deceived. The truth is that the German workers... they... let themselves be fooled by this bandit," he paused

and then said bitterly: "I'm a miner. Well, in Germany there are miners. And I keep on thinking: how is it that the German miners let such a terrible thing happen? How was it that they attacked us—Russian miners? How was it that they hewed coal for those factories, which were building aeroplanes—Junkers—which bombed my home mine, where I had worked all my life and where the workers are the owners? How were they fooled like that? I must say, I didn't think a miner could be misled like that!" He paused, then explained grimly: "I'm only taking a miner as an example. I mean any worker. And now, of course, it's up to us to show a working-class, Soviet consciousness, and to understand 'why' and 'how,' in order to avoid hating all Germans in general—those who did the fooling and those who were fooled. . . . Comrade Stalin has always taught us that. . . ."

"One of yours?" Lubentsov asked Chokhov in a whisper, nodding approvingly.

Chokhov answered, "Party organizer Slivenko."

"He's right," said Lubentsov, winking slyly. "Clever man. Not like some others."

Chokhov flushed: he understood perfectly well what Lubentsov meant. The scout, it was clear, remembered their recent encounter.

Meanwhile Slivenko had suddenly broken off and was silent. Then he shouted:

"Look: the Germans are moving!"

Small figures of German soldiers could be seen running along the railway embankment.

"Inform the artillery," said Lubentsov.

Chokhov went quickly to the telephone in his dugout. Our artillery and the German artillery fired almost simultaneously. The duel went on for ten minutes. The German shells exploded slightly to the left, but very close.

"Down!" said Lubentsov, who was still observing.

By the flashes, the sound of the guns and the force of the explosion he was estimating the positions and calibre of the enemy artillery. Lubentsov had no equal at this, and the artillerymen always consulted him. Watching and listening, he said quietly to himself:

"Yes.... Seventy-five milimetres.... Good.... One more of the same calibre in range between the station and the depot.... Fine. Oho, what a crash! Not less than a hundred and fifty milimetres... Wait, wait!... It's.... Lie down, lads!"

He bent down. After a hideous shriek, a shell burst behind the trench. A lone elder tree not far from Chokhov's dugout cracked and blew to pieces. Shrapnel and pieces of wood whistled about. Lubentsov looked round and saw the Company Commander. Chokhov was standing on a mound, his head and shoulders out of the trench, smoking. His face wore the same independent look as when he was riding in the carriage. Lubentsov smiled half mockingly, half approvingly and thought: "Swanky blighter! But he's got guts, whatever you say!"

"Keep down lower," he said, "why take unnecessary risks?"

Chokhov obeyed.

The artillery duel ended as suddenly as it had begun.

"Let's go," said Lubentsov turning to the scouts, "we must report the situation to the Divisional Commander." He gave Chokhov a friendly farewell handshake and said again: "And your Party organizer's a fine man! A real Communist...."

The scouts were soon hidden from view and Chokhov stood a little longer in the trench. He thought of Lubentsov with a sudden liking.

Chokhov was brave and knew it, but he could not fail to notice for himself that Lubentsov's bravery was of a purer kind.

Lubentsov did not show off his fearlessness. He was standing in the trench, not because he wanted to show people what he could do but because it was his business to do so. Chokhov had noticed the scouts' love for Lubentsov. The soldiers of the Second Company respected Chokhov but in their attitude towards him there was not that warmth and almost blind faith which the Major of the Guards obviously had from his soldiers. •

Chokhov was overcome by a desire, common among very young people, to resemble a man who has caught their imagination. But he checked himself hastily. Such a feeling seemed humiliating.

On the way back to Headquarters the Major thought not so much of Chokhov as of the meeting with Tanya the day before yesterday which was connected with him—apparently his last meeting with Tanya.

XVIII

The ill will towards Tanya apparent in the nurse's words to Lubentsov was not there by chance. The people of the Medical Battalion had recently been censuring their new surgeon, whom at first they had all liked.

For more than a month one of the corps chiefs, Colonel Semyon Semyonovich Krasikov, had been paying special attention to Tanya. He was twice her age, a distinguished-looking officer, well known in the divisions for his severity and personal bravery. Everyone knew that he had a grown-up daughter, almost Tanya's age.

Had her fellow workers been indifferent to Tanya, the affair would probably not have worried them. But they liked Tanya and they were sorry to be disappointed in her. Tanya's best friend, Maria Ivanovna Levkoyeva, the Commander of the Hospital Platoon, a tall, slant-eyed, talkative brunette with Tatar cheekbones and full

breasts, was especially indignant. True, she generally treated men with exceptional distrust and never ceased to reproach those nurses who had boy friends among soldiers and officers.

"You think it will just pass?" said she. "Don't worry, the war doesn't make any difference! You think it won't get known? You think you'll go home and begin a new life? Nothing of the kind! The world's a small place, my girls! Believe me!"

It is not known whether the girls of the Medical Battalion followed her advice. As for Tanya, she told Masha to her face that she did not wish to listen to lectures and, in answer to her friend's angry speeches, she only laughed softly.

This laughter disarmed Masha. Most people were appeased by Tanya's laughter: there was so much kindness in it. It immediately changed one's whole conception of her. When she was serious and stern, a vertical furrow appeared between her dark eyebrows. Many considered her severe, unapproachable and rather cross. But she had only to laugh, and it was clear at once that this woman's soul was very gentle, true, and kind.

Wounded men who did not know her name, did in fact call her: "that woman-doctor who has a kind laugh."

Before Tanya left for the surgeons' conference in the Army Medical Department, Masha tried once more to have a heart-to-heart talk with her.

She went into Tanya's room without knocking and stood for a moment by the door, for some reason fumbling in the pockets of her greatcoat as if searching there for words, which was not like her. Then she embraced Tanya impetuously and even cried a little.

Masha's tears offended Tanya. She said shortly:

"What are you crying over me for? Why stand there hypocritically silent, with that malicious smile on your

face? And anyhow, who is asking you to protect me? Semyon Semyonovich is a very kind, nice man...."

"Kind! We know these kind men!" exclaimed Masha.

"What rubbish you've got into your head!" Tanya began to laugh. "For your peace of mind, let me tell you that Semyon Semyonovich treats me just as a good comrade."

"Don't laugh, please," Masha shielded herself with her hand from Tanya's laughter. "What do you think? That he wants to adopt you as his daughter? Sorry for the orphan? Well, do as you please.... Evidently it flatters you to have a colonel running round after you, being strict with everyone but gentle with you, teaching you to drive a car.... But it disgusts me!"

She went away slamming the door angrily.

Tanya liked Krasikov. It did, in fact, flatter her that a man with great experience of life should treat her as a friend, should be kind to her, and that perhaps he even loved her. She was greatly attracted by his bravery, of which she had heard much. For all that, Tanya rather firmly warded off Krasikov's attempts to bring a lyrical note into the conversation, replying to them with laughter.

When she returned from the surgeons' conference, still under the impression of that carefree journey in the carriage and the unexpected meeting with Lubentsov, Tanya went to the Commander of the Medical Battalion, Captain Rutkovsky. Krasikov rang up during their conversation. Rutkovsky handed her the receiver.

"Back already?" Krasikov was pleased. "How was the journey?"

"Very good!" answered Tanya. "I left my unit in Poland and returned to it in Germany. And do you know how I arrived in Germany? You'll never guess! In a carriage! In a real carriage belonging to a count."

"When shall we see each other?" asked Krasikov. "Perhaps you will come here? All right? I'll send someone

to fetch you.... You haven't anything to do today. Take a turn at the wheel...."

She agreed, and meanwhile went to have dinner in the house where the kitchen was.

Dinner was already over and the doctors had all dispersed. The cook, a little black-eyed Ukrainian girl, served Tanya the second course and stood beside her with her dark hands crossed on her breast.

"So the war will soon be over," she said. "Were you ever in Zhmerinka, Tanya Vladimirovna?"

She always addressed Tanya in this strange way—using her name in its diminutive form and formal patronymic at the same time. And Tanya liked it.

"No," replied Tanya. "Why?"

"I come from Zhmerinka," the cook smiled in embarrassment, as if she were speaking of something sacred.

"You want to go home?" guessed Tanya.

"Yes."

Tanya said:

"And my town is all destroyed. Yukhnov. It was a tiny little town. Probably you have never even heard of it?"

"Why not? Of course I've heard of it. In the Information Bureau's dispatches."

Tanya left the dining room. The car was already waiting for her. It was snowing. The snowflakes fell on the smooth surface of the car and dissolved slowly over it. The driver was dozing behind the wet windshield. Tanya opened the door and sat down beside him. He started, then greeted her and asked:

"Will you take the wheel, Tatyana Vladimirovna?"

"No, drive yourself."

Smiling absently as she watched the bare trees along the roadside, Tanya thought about Lubentsov and her two meetings with him. But when she remembered how they had parted today, Tanya ceased to smile. Lubentsov

had said good-bye to her somehow very coldly. He had seen some cars from his division and hurried off, as if it were absolutely necessary for him to leave with just those cars....

In the village where Corps Headquarters was situated, Krasikov occupied a small house, behind an iron fence. At the window, a yellow parrot fluttered in a large cage, a legacy from the former owners. As Tanya entered, the parrot greeted her in a piercing rasping voice:

"Auf Wiedersehen!"

Semyon Semyonovich was not at home. However, he soon called up. Usually Krasikov talked confidently and loudly, and laughed boisterously. Now he said in a quick whisper:

"Tanya, excuse me.... General Sizokrylov has arrived, unexpectedly...."

"All right, I'll wait," said Tanya.

"No-o," faltered Krasikov. "It's not worth it, I'll be some time...." He added in what was now a firm and businesslike tone, as if he were talking with some staff officer: "There's a complicated operation ahead. We must start preparing. And you tell your people to be ready too. Good-bye."

"Auf Wiedersehen!" screeched the parrot.

Tanya drove off with an indefinable feeling of irritation. Semyon Semyonovich had not offended her, but there was something in his tone which she did not like. Probably it was Krasikov's fear of the member of the Military Council that irritated her.

Tanya was not mistaken. Krasikov was indeed a little afraid of Sizokrylov. The General's exacting standards and his keen eye for mistakes had become proverbial. Besides, Sizokrylov did not tolerate "campaign love." At every meeting with Krasikov the General was sure to ask about his wife and daughter.

Perhaps he did this on purpose? Perhaps he had heard something about Krasikov's infatuation? That was quite likely: the General's officers were often surprised how well the General was informed about their lives and their work.

Sizokrylov paid only a short visit to Corps Headquarters. He was visiting the tank troops on an extremely urgent task from the High Command. He was accompanied by a tank-general, the commander of the armoured formation which had just arrived at the front. The Corps Commander and his assistants were at Army Headquarters, so the member of the Military Council talked with Krasikov for fifteen minutes.

Sizokrylov did not have a bad opinion of Krasikov. He valued him for his energy, bravery and organizing ability. True, the General considered Krasikov incapable of thinking independently. On the other hand, he carried out all orders very exactly.

Sizokrylov was often irritated by this mechanical efficiency. When conducting a meeting or giving orders, the member of the Military Council longed for objections—objections on practical grounds, corrections based on the personal experience of his subordinates. In an argument he became animated, debated heatedly and finally reached a decision, after considering all points of view.

The General sat opposite Krasikov with a stern, impenetrable face. He heard Krasikov's report, gave him directions about improving the work of the corps' rear formations and gave a warning about the new problems arising from the advance into German territory. "Here," he said, "the severest measures must be taken against those who violate military discipline."

"Yes, Comrade General," answered Semyon Semyonovich.

Sizokrylov looked at him from under lowered brows. He was displeased that Krasikov had immediately and unthinkingly agreed with him. He went on:

"After what the Germans have done in our homeland, it may not be so easy to restrain our soldiers. What do you think?"

"I agree, Comrade General."

"Nonetheless it is essential to do so. The matter must be explained to them patiently and in detail; disciplinary and other measures, even court martial, must be taken. Having smashed fascism, we are giving the German people the opportunity to create a new democratic Germany and gather strength for the struggle against the powerful financial oligarchies, incidentally, not only the German ones. Not all Germans are our enemies. Our men must be taught to distinguish the good and the bad."

"Yes, Comrade General," said Krasikov.

"But," concluded the General with dissatisfaction, turning away to the window, "the Germans ought to be given a thorough lesson, so that their grandchildren remember that they must not go to war with Russia, and particularly not with Soviet Russia."

"I see, Comrade General."

"What do you see?" asked the General, unexpectedly.

Krasikov was confused. Then Sizokrylov said emphatically:

"It is your job not to allow breaches of discipline in your corps, in spite of the justifiable longing for revenge in the hearts of our soldiers."

After a silence, the General asked: "What do they write from home? Are your wife and daughter well?"

"Quite well."

The General stood up.

"Shall I accompany you?"

"It's not necessary."

When he had seen the General to his car Krasikov stood at attention until the car and the armoured troop

carrier following it, were swallowed up in the evening shadows.

Semyon Semyonovich's conscience pricked him a little about Tanya. Although he wanted to see her very badly he did not dare ring up the Medical Battalion.

XIX

After the following day's march the Medical Battalion encamped in a forest village, lost in the depths of the Schneidemühl "Stadtforst." In the morning they pitched the tents. The head of the dispensary, grumbling, unpacked his medical chests.

At dawn Tanya washed, put on her gown and went to her tent.

Rutkovsky was standing at the next crossroad. Some old men and women had gathered round him, muttering something in German. It appeared they were asking if they could stay in the village or did they have to leave, although no one was driving them out.

Tanya was surprised to see them.

Not that she was so naive as not to expect to meet ordinary old men and women in Germany. But she had stored up so much hatred for the Germans in her heart during these four terrible years, that she simply could not admit that they possessed feelings and thoughts and other human attributes. The very word "German" reminded her of the burnt-out towns and villages where Russian people were living underground, reminded her of bursts of fire from black aircraft at women and children, reminded her of the bombing of hospital trains and, lastly, of her husband, who had died on some nameless hill by the great Russian river.

She looked coldly at the weeping old women and men. Their tears seemed to her shameless. How dared they weep, they who had made so many tears flow!

She was surprised that the same lime trees and oaks grew in Germany as in her native Yukhnov. She was surprised too that ordinary old men and women with ordinary wrinkles and tears lived here. And only their strange, incomprehensible talk confirmed her hatred. After all that proved it: they were Germans.

Still they were human beings. And in the long run Tanya felt sorry for them: they did look very oppressed, and seemed to be restraining their fear, as if they were listening with ears deafened by thunder to a world which had become grim and hostile to them.

One tall, bald old man crumpled his cap in his hand and said plaintively in Russian to Tanya:

"Comrade.... Comrade...."

Where had he learnt that word? Perhaps he had fraternized with the Russian revolutionary soldiers in 1918? It was unpleasant to hear a word of one's native language from the alien sunken mouth of the German. Was there anything more behind this word than servility and fear?

You are late in remembering that we are comrades, thought Tanya.

The first wounded began to come in.

By the character of the wounds it was possible to judge the character of the fighting. This was an attack on the strongly fortified, previously prepared enemy defences. Serious leg and arm wounds predominated—men injured by mines.

At the sight of Tanya, the wounded would grow quiet at once. It was unseemly for a man to shout and groan before a young and beautiful woman. Isn't she too young? thought those who were older and more experienced. Dressed in white she seemed even younger than her twenty-five years and at first they even took her for a nurse. But no, this was a doctor. The nurses fussed respectfully around her, half a word or a glance was enough to make her orders understood. And in her grey eyes

was that calm certainty which comes only with skill. The wounded looked at her trustingly, even making an effort to smile, searching for sympathy and approval.

She said:

"Good man! That's a soldier! So young, and such a fine man!"

Or:

"As old as you, and such a fine man!"

Sometimes she became talkative; that was during the most difficult operations. "What, does it hurt, dear?" she would ask, even a little coquettishly.

"Don't look at your wound. It's not as interesting as all that. . . . What do you know about wounds anyway? They can seem big and terrible, when they're only scratches."

The wounded kept coming. The bloodstained swabs seemed to swim before her eyes. The nurses, always cheerful and gay, now moved attentively and noiselessly about Tanya.

Among the wounded in the sorting tent Tanya caught a glimpse of one whose face seemed familiar to her. When she returned to the operating table she kept trying to remember where she had seen that face, but in vain.

They brought in a man with an abdominal wound, then an artilleryman with his face burned. And above her white surgical mask her big grey eyes shone steadily and calmly on this small world of blood, groans and sighs beneath her deft gloved fingers.

Doctors and nurses kept on coming up to her asking for advice and help. She would go slowly across to the next table or simply from a distance cock her head and look attentively at the wound, then she would either nod or shake her head, say something quietly and return to her own table.

Sometimes Masha would run into the room. She would look lovingly at Tanya, then go back to her own room and say:

"She will make a wonderful surgeon! If, of course, men don't turn her head!..."

She searched out Rutkovsky and whispered loudly to him:

"Do make her eat a little. She's been on her feet since morning. Just a drink of tea! You are wearing her out!"

At about two o'clock Krasikov drove up.

"Well, what's the news?" he asked Rutkovsky.

Rutkovsky reported the number of wounded men—treated and untreated.

"When will you evacuate them?"

"Towards the end of the day, Comrade Colonel."

Krasikov entered the operating tent. He had never seen Tanya at work before. At first he noticed only how slender she looked in her white gown belted at the waist. But watching her precise confident movements, and hearing her calm voice, the Colonel was filled with a feeling of deep respect for her and—strangely enough—for himself too. He thought excitedly: I have not made a mistake.... A wonderful woman.... He looked for a long time at the back of her head, at her soft hair, barely visible beneath her white cap, and walked quietly away.

They put a soldier on Tanya's table whose face seemed familiar to her. When she took the bandage from his right arm with her forceps, Tanya saw that she would have to amputate the hand: it was shattered.

"Never mind," said Tanya, "be patient. This will hurt you a little, I'm going to clean up your wound now. Never mind, dark eyes."

"I'm..." he whispered.

And then she recognized him. It was the "coachman." She remembered his debonair appearance on the carriage seat, and her heart beat hard. The nurse noticed her sudden pallor and said:

"Tatyana Vladimirovna, you need a rest."

"Yes, perhaps," agreed Tanya, thinking of Lubentsov. May nothing happen to him, she thought.

She suppressed her momentary weakness, and began the operation. The "coachman" fell fitfully asleep under the anaesthetic, counting in an unsteady voice:

"Twenty-one. . . . Twenty-two. . . . Twenty-three. . . ."

When the operation was over, Masha came quietly into the tent. Her feigned indignation concealed admiration and sympathy:

"Will you please go and sleep immediately. There are only a few wounded left. We can do without you."

Tanya obediently washed her hands, took off her bloodstained gown, put on her greatcoat and went out of the tent. It was already dark. A sharp, cold wind roared round the houses. She walked along the street, not thinking of anything, and collected her thoughts only on the very outskirts of the village, when she heard Rutkovsky's voice behind her:

"Tatyana Vladimirovna, go to bed, will you."

She walked back saying, pleadingly:

"I'll be back in a moment. Let me have a breath of air."

She turned towards the house where the hospital platoon was quartered. Even in the passage, groans and subdued voices could be heard. The duty nurses stood up and reported to Tanya how the wounded were feeling and which of them were doing badly.

Tanya went slowly along the beds, listening to the talk.

"The Germans are still resisting," said one of the wounded, twisting makhorka with his left hand. His right hand was wounded and had been bandaged. The soldier was sitting on the bed. His face was calm and he spoke calmly. "No one can stand up against us now."

"He's running away even on his own soil," said a second wounded man. "Where will he run to now? To the Americans to hide himself?"

A third groaned. This man was lying down. He, too, wanted to have his say and, gasping and groaning, he said: "If you think a bit, the fascists would be better off with them . . . they are both tarred with the same brush."

On the furthest bed lay the "coachman." He was very pale. He was called Kallistrat Evgrafovich, he told Tanya. The long imposing name did not suit his young face at all.

"And don't you recognize me?" she asked.

In fact he had already recognized her that morning, but had apparently thought it out of place to remind her.

"We didn't think, then, that this would happen," he said quietly and after a pause asked shyly: "How is my hand? I'm a sapper in the army and in civvy street my job's carpentry. I mustn't lose a hand."

"You'll get better," she said, avoiding a direct answer.

The wounded were groaning as usual, but among these wounded Tanya noticed something she had not noticed before. Instead of a certain satisfaction that they had not been killed but only, thank God, wounded, they now felt bitterness because they had not managed to fight the war till the end. Only a stone's throw from Berlin and they had tripped up like this.

Artillery rumbled in the distance. The wounded listened to it with a kind of dreamy abnegation, as old men listen to tales of the difficult but golden times of youth.

XX

General Sereda was assailed on all sides. The Corps Commander and Army Commander rang up almost hourly asking whether he intended to be much longer taking Schneidemühl. Other divisions were already on the approaches to the Oder but Sereda still could not take this wretched little "hole."

Schneidemühl, which before had justly been called a fortress, was now dubbed by the Commander of the Army, with emphatic scorn, "a little hole." He even, not without malice, advised Sereda to read the popular booklets on street fighting, particularly the one on Stalingrad during the mopping up of the Germans encircled there.

"Yes," answered Sereda, his face glowering with indignation.

The General operated from the very tower which Major of the Guards Lubentsov had chosen as an observation post. The tower stood on the outskirts of the village, one and a half kilometres from Schneidemühl. The town, the German positions among the shell-battered houses, the barricades and road blocks across the streets of the suburbs, a big bridge and a railway embankment, in which the enemy had made machine-gun emplacements, could be seen through the telescope fairly clearly from the tower.

On the left, the buildings of the Albatros factory were visible. This factory was the pivot of the German defence system. There they had placed machine guns and soldiers armed with faustpatrones. From time to time tanks would creep out from behind the buildings. They would fire a few shells and then disappear only to appear again somewhere else.

Lubentsov was at the observation post with the Divisional Commander. It was manned with the usual complement of staff officers, artillerymen and signallers. Food in thermos flasks and Moscow newspapers were in supply. The Moscow papers were seven or eight days old and Lubentsov, remembering yesterday's Berlin papers which he had read, could not help smiling at the thought of the tremendous distance the army had covered.

At the observation post General Sereda was usually very restless: sometimes he looked through the telescope,

sometimes he reproached the signallers for bad reception and frequent breaks, sometimes he personally corrected the artillery fire. Now he was sitting before a map, near the vaulted window of the tower.

Progress could be measured in metres. The Germans were counterattacking almost continuously. On the second day of the siege a lone German aircraft had dropped leaflets on the town. Lubentsov had found one and brought it to the General. It was an order to the garrison to hold out at all costs, "Do not give the Bolsheviks the key to Berlin." And at the end the leaflet boasted, in big, triumphant Gothic letters—"Tanks are coming to your aid."

"There's shamelessness for you!" burst out the General. "What tanks? Where from? Oh! Liars!"

There was a brief pause, then Plotnikov said:

"Just a moment, we must open the eyes of these Schneidemühl fools. I'll manage this." He turned to Lubentsov. "Bring along a couple of prisoners—you know, the more sensible kind."

In the evening the Political Department men dragged a loudspeaker up to the advanced positions. Oganessian went with them. Major Garin drafted a proclamation to the Schneidemühl garrison and Oganessian sweated for a long time, translating the Russian text into German. At last everything was ready.

In the evening Lubentsov found the broadcast personnel in the battalion trenches of the forward positions. Oganessian was rehearsing his text. The two prisoners had been given pencils and were jotting down their speeches in Garin's field notebook. Oganessian read them, translated them to Garin and discussed the details with the Germans. The Germans were showing "healthy initiative," as Lubentsov put it. They had plenty of suggestions "to make it work better."

Oganessian began speaking.

The German words created a great hush. The machine guns stopped firing. Even the rocket guns were silent.

The Germans began to show signs of life only when one of the prisoners started speaking. The barking explosions of mortar shells resounded through the neighbourhood. Then a quick-firing gun joined in, gasping with a desire to drown all that was being said.

Nevertheless, in the intervals between the firing, the prisoner managed to finish his speech.

Lubentsov was called to the observation post of the Regimental Commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Chetverikov. The Divisional Commander had arrived there to check their readiness for the morning attack.

Besides General Sereda and Chetverikov at the O.P. were Major Migayev and the Divisional Artillery Commander, huge, fat Lieutenant-Colonel Sizykh.

The General asked the Regimental Commander if the men had been brought up closer to the enemy, to make the charge forward shorter. Chetverikov said they had.

"Let's go," said the Divisional Commander.

They walked towards the advanced position in silence: the General in front, behind him Chetverikov, Sizykh and Lubentsov, the orderlies bringing up the rear. Major Migayev, at the General's order, remained at Headquarters.

The General stopped at First Battalion's O.P. It was a narrow slit trench lined with straw on a low hillock. The Battalion Commander, a thin awkward major, did not notice the arrival of the chiefs. He was looking through his binoculars at the dimming outlines of the houses and shouting into the telephone receiver:

"Do you see a white house near the red building on the right? There's a machine gun there in the cellar. Give him a burst.... There he is, the blighter. Give him a burst, I ask you, as a brother...."

Noticing the General at last, the Major dropped the receiver, jumped up and reported:

"Comrade General, the First Battalion is engaged in attacking the fortress of Schneidemühl. Commander of the battalion, Major Veselchakov, reporting."

"Fortress, fortress . . ." grumbled the Divisional Commander. "What kind of a fortress is this? The dirty little hole. Why don't you move forward?"

Veselchakov started explaining, but the General seemed not to listen. He took the binoculars from the Battalion Commander and trained them on the enemy lines. The Battalion Commander said nothing. There was a tense silence. Not far off a machine gun clattered.

The General put down the binoculars and jumped lightly on to the parapet, stepped across it and went slowly forward. They went out to a small hollow, overgrown with bushes. The General said:

"Stay here. I'll go on to that cottage, then you follow me—but one at a time."

"Why must you go up so far?" said Sizykh. "If the Corps Commander finds out, there will be trouble."

"All right, if you don't tell him, he won't find out," answered the Divisional Commander.

"Take off your *papakha*, Comrade General," advised Lubentsov.

Without replying, the General walked leisurely across the open space to the cottage, where one of the companies had its headquarters. The cottage was riddled with bullets. The Company Commander was sitting in the shelter of the stove, writing something.

"At ease!" warned the General as the Lieutenant attempted to rise. "Where are your men? Why aren't they advancing?"

The Lieutenant began to point out on the map the position of his men, but the General said, impatiently:

"Don't show me that. We are not at Army Headquarters. Come on."

"The firing's pretty heavy here." The Lieutenant was afraid for the General's safety, but the General was already walking slowly away, and the Lieutenant followed him.

Two ammunition bearers passed, bending low to the ground, and dragging along boxes of cartridges. When they saw the General they stood up erect.

"At ease!" said the General. "What company are you from?"

"First Company," answered the bearers.

"Where are your men?"

"Over there, in the graveyard."

"Chosen a good place," grinned the General.

Bullets whistled round them. It grew dark. With the Lieutenant and the bearers the General went up to the First Company. The soldiers were sitting or lying in the shallow trenches with their backs to the strong wind.

"Why have you got your behinds facing the Germans?" asked the General.

The soldiers recognized their Divisional Commander and began to get up hurriedly.

"Lie down," said the General. He listened to the whistling of the bullets and then asked: "Are the Germans far away? Or can't you see out of your behinds?"

"They're close.... And they're spraying us with a machine gun."

"How near?"

"A hundred metres."

"Well, let's go and see."

The General and the soldiers went forward single file. They covered about two hundred metres in the thick darkness. The wind blew in their faces. The General listened.

"Perhaps you can dig in here," he said. "The Germans are now really two hundred metres away, I

think. . . ." He turned to a soldier: "So they're bashing away with a machine gun, are they?"

The soldier had nothing to say.

Chetverikov, Sizykh, Lubentsov, the Battalion Commander, and the Company Commander came up silently. The General turned back without glancing at them. The officers followed him in silence. German machine guns began to clatter: the enemy, apparently, had noticed some movement in the darkness or, perhaps, had even heard their voices.

When he reached the Battalion Commander's O.P. the General said:

"At dawn tomorrow your regiment will take the factory. We shall support you with all the division's artillery. The Albatros factory is the key to the situation. It must be taken at all costs. The artillery barrage will last for thirty minutes. Or—for the sake of surprise—thirty-three minutes. You," he nodded towards Lubentsov, "must organize the reconnaissance. The Germans' system of fire must be reconnoitred—and reconnoitred accurately."

They left the battalion O.P.

At Regimental Headquarters the General flatly refused supper, turned to Chetverikov and Migayev and said with a bitter smile:

"Do you call that work? And you sent me reports about heavy fire. Oh, what a surprise! So the infantry can't move forward. And what's the infantry for? Infantry has to be led. Commanded. Or have you forgotten about that? Perhaps it'll go by itself? Give it a push and see?"

Back at his own observation post the General allowed Sizykh and Lubentsov to go in first, then, shutting the narrow door firmly behind him, he turned to the artilleryman and said:

"And you know what, the men are right. The war is ending, everyone wants to live, my dear artilleryman! Everyone wants to go home, to get back to his home town and show off a bit with his medals and build a happy life. There's no point in their getting in front of a machine gun. And it's not necessary. Do you understand or not? It's not ne-ces-sa-ry! We need men.... Do you think the infantry will put up with everything? Not if I know it. You give them fire! Smash those German machine guns, then the infantry will move. What have you got to say? You don't have to be in the forward area, anyhow: you've worked your way up to artillery commander? Is that it? I warn you: tomorrow there must be real artillery fire, accurate and on the mark! The battalion commanders won't have to ask for fire on the telephone ... the battery commanders will be in the forward area with the company commanders, do you understand? And you will be with Chetverikov! Do you remember what the member of the Military Council said? Germany must be taken as Velikiye Luki was taken, it must be fought for!"

Sizykh jumped out of the Divisional Commander's cubbyhole, flushed and perspiring, and ran to give his orders. Lubentsov ordered Chibiryov to saddle the horses to go to Chetverikov's regiment.

The General was left alone. As he sat over the map he suddenly felt that he missed somebody. And then he realized it was Vika. She was already living at the second echelon. Should he ring her up? But it was already late and he did not want to wake her.

Ten minutes later Vika herself rang up. The General sensed from her voice that she had felt this same need. She seemed to be lonely without her father. But the girl did not say so. Addressing her father correctly as "comrade thirty-five," she asked how things were and if objective twenty-seven (the Albatros factory) had been taken.

The General's heart contracted with pity and love for her. She needs a mother, he thought.

Rockets were bursting over the town and the chatter of machine guns could still be heard. It was a cold windy night.

The General remembered the soldiers of the First Company and smiled sadly, thinking that probably each one of them also had some complicated personal problems, but that all these problems would take second place on this night, before the battle. Now the main thing in life was that they were two hundred and forty kilometres from Berlin, while other divisions were fighting their way on to the Oder.

Late that night Colonel Krasikov called on the General. When he had studied the plan for tomorrow's battle he asked in a worried voice:

"Will you take the factory?"

"We hope so," said the Divisional Commander.

"Vorobyov hasn't done badly," Krasikov told him rather slyly. "Perhaps you would like some help from the corps artillery?"

"We'll manage," answered the General angrily. "Better help Vorobyov."

Krasikov was soon summoned to Corps Headquarters and the General was again left to himself.

At dawn Sereda left his cubbyhole and went to see his officers. He took a long and careful look through the telescope and then said:

"There it is . . . that 'hole'." Glancing round and noticing that everyone was standing up, he said: "Sit down, always glad to jump up and stop work, idle lot! . . ."

After a silence, he asked: "Where is Sizykh? Aha, with Chetverikov. . . ." He looked at his watch: "Well, it's time to begin."

Lubentsov lay with his scouts in a hollow among some thorn bushes and looked at the small fenced-in houses, the scattered heaps of bricks and scrap metal to the right and the massive buildings of the factory rising out of the smoke. On the left lay a line of riflemen scarcely visible among the bushes. Meshchersky and Voronin crouched beside the Major of the Guards.

The scouts looked half asleep. Wet and silent in their mud-stained capes, they seemed clumsy, drowsy, incapable of moving or thinking quickly.

The Major looked at them and frowned angrily. He himself was in a state of feverish excitement. He was extremely anxious to finish with Schneidemühl and to move with all the other divisions on to the west, to Berlin.

At 6.00 the guns roared. Houses in the town burst into flames. Columns of smoke and dust rose in the air among the factory buildings. The riflemen began to run forward. Bullets whizzed past. Pale medical orderlies moved about the hollow with stretchers.

Lubentsov looked at his watch. At the thirty-third minute came that familiar joyful sound, loved by all soldiers—the stuttering, shattering roar of the “Katyushas,” the Guards mortars, which always give soldiers courage and a feeling that they are invulnerable.

This was the signal for attack.

The scouts quickly came to life. Their drowsiness vanished in a second. Tossing their capes aside, they stood up in light padded jackets. Their belts loaded with hand-grenades gave them a tigerish gait befitting scouts.

Lubentsov heaved a deep sigh and smiled broadly. “Let’s go,” he said.

The scouts disappeared almost instantly into the undergrowth of the bushes. Behind them crawled two

signallers with telephones and coils of wire. The coils began to unwind squeakily. The wire twisted about on the muddy earth, creeping hesitantly, then tautened, then leapt boldly forward, brushing aside the wet branches of the bushes.

From the left came cries of "Hurrah." They sounded quite faint amid the roar of the wind and chatter of the machine guns.

Lubentsov watched our lines attentively. The tiny figures ran forward, fell down in the mud and again ran on. Soon these figures reappeared, already behind the brick piles. The Germans woke up and opened fire on our positions with mortars and artillery. But the men were already out of range of the explosions.

Lubentsov now turned his attention to the telephone line. It had stopped and lay on the ground, limp and motionless as if dead.

"I'll go forward," said Lubentsov impatiently to Meshchersky. "As soon as the regiment takes the nearest buildings of the factory, make a rush for the pump house. Voronin and I will be there."

Lubentsov started to follow the line. He took Chibiryov with him.

A battlefield, if you look at it from a distance, seems to be one single strip of fire, barren and mortally dangerous. But once you are on it, you will see that it has an extremely varied landscape with houses and barns, trees, roads, paths and ditches. Sometimes there are lulls, quite long ones. Men talk and even laugh, although rarely.

They moved on. Chibiryov's square face, with its tiny sharp eyes, bobbed at Lubentsov's shoulder, as if it had been glued there. In the brief moments when Lubentsov flattened himself on the ground at the sound of a shell, Chibiryov's face still seemed to be there, at his left shoulder.

Either because the battle was becoming more and more fierce or because Lubentsov and Chibiryov had entered a specially hot part of the struggle, it became even more difficult to move forward. The whole earth was exploding.

In a ditch by the roadside six wounded men sat talking.

"Fritz is still resisting," said one of them with dignity.

The second:

"Must be relying on God. This place is as stuffed with churches as we are with grain elevators, down in the Kuban."

The third, an older man:

"What God? Hitler's their God. They pray to him, the fools."

The fourth told a story:

"Yesterday a General came to our company. He led us in attack himself. Walks on, standing right up straight, and orders us to keep low. They can send another general, he says, but without soldiers even the new one won't fight...."

Not far from the pump house, beside a fresh shell-crater, lay the two signallers with the telephone. They had both been killed. Chibiryov picked up the telephone and coil.

At the pump house Lubentsov was met by scouts from Voronin's group. They said that Voronin had gone on, and told them to keep watch from here. They had been watching in vain for the signallers with the telephone.

"They are dead," said Lubentsov.

He climbed into the tower and began to watch the battle. The nearest buildings of the factory had been taken by our men. Fresh lines were moving up from the rear. Apparently Chetverikov had thrown the Third Battalion into the battle. The Germans were gathering

behind the main building. They reached it by crawling along the communication trenches. Four tanks appeared on the long, straight road near the main building. Lubentsov informed Headquarters by telephone where the enemy was concentrating. After a few minutes he had the satisfaction of seeing our artillery strike at the German tanks and infantry. One tank burst into flames.

The Germans soon realized what an advantageous position the Russian observers had taken up in the pump house. Shells began to burst all round. It trembled—about to fall. Lubentsov dropped flat on the cement floor, then forced himself to rise and soon sighted his enemy: a self-propelled gun was firing at the tower. He saw its long barrel sticking out among the ruined houses.

"Self-propelled gun on the corner of Berlinerstrasse!" he shouted into the telephone.

A minute later one shell and then another burst near the self-propelled gun. Lubentsov wiped the perspiration from his hot forehead and mentally thanked, from the bottom of his heart, the fat Lieutenant-Colonel Sizykh and also the Divisional Commander, who had given the artilleryman such a good and useful dressing down.

It grew quiet. The battle had moved further on. When Meshchersky and his men came up, Lubentsov went forward with Chibiryov and Mitrokhin, taking the telephone. Meshchersky had his own set.

Again Chibiryov's face bobbed along at Lubentsov's left shoulder. When they had gone about three hundred metres, they again found themselves in the very midst of the battle, among the factory buildings. Even Chibiryov whispered every minute:

"Get down, Comrade Major of the Guards."

If you still remember my full rank, we can go on further, thought Lubentsov, running from cover to cover between the machine-gun bursts. It soon became neces-

sary to crawl. They were making for a four-storied block of flats: the view from its upper windows would obviously be excellent. At last they reached the porch. Breathing heavily, Lubentsov pushed the door. It opened into a large room with shelves and wide counters—a shop. At the shattered window sat a German soldier, his head bleeding. He was dead and was only supported by the window sill on which he was leaning. Beside him lay a pile of grenades with wooden handles, and a rifle. Lubentsov picked up a few of the grenades. Mitrokhin and Chibiryov did the same.

They mounted the staircase and went into a flat on the fourth floor. Lubentsov looked through the window and gasped with delight: before him lay the whole German defence on the palm of his hand. He quickly attached the telephone and rang up. Meshchersky answered at once from the pump house.

"Send: group of infantry in the factory offices on the left.... Along the Berlinerstrasse Germans are lying in a communication trench.... Killed? No, they are assembling for a counterattack.... I am staying here, objective sixty-five. First-class observation post! Send men to me...."

The line broke down.

"Mitrokhin," said Lubentsov, "double back, repair the break on the way and bring the men here."

Mitrokhin disappeared and about five minutes later the line was working again.

"Four tanks," Lubentsov shouted hastily into the telephone, "moving up Querstrasse. Another three are coming from the centre of the town along Seminarstrasse. Now they are level with the main building.... Tell the General: he must attack on all sectors simultaneously.... Only like that, you understand? Simultaneously! They bring up troops from other sectors...."

Again the line broke down.

Looking up from the telephone Lubentsov noticed that his orderly was acting somehow strangely. He was staring intently, too intently, out of the window.

Lubentsov also glanced downwards and saw lines of German soldiers approaching. Machine guns chattered furiously. Big guns crashed. All joined together in a single, inhuman roar. The Germans drew level with the house, flowed round it and ran on further.

The noise of battle appeared to move further away.

"Our men are retiring," said Chibiryov.

Downstairs German voices were audible, then they stopped.

"Never mind," said Lubentsov, "we'll get out," and added vaguely: "Mitrokhin will tell...."

All the excitement of the past minutes left Lubentsov. He must be deliberate and cool. He went up to the door and listened. It was quiet. He turned to the window. Light snow was falling. Near the house stood a brick petrol station bearing a large notice: "SHELL." At the end of the yard stood old cars on wooden blocks.

About a hundred Germans went past the petrol pumps. They were chattering excitedly and marched fairly confidently, without stooping.

"Never mind," said Lubentsov, "we'll get out."

"We'll go back, when it gets dark," said Chibiryov. Lubentsov retorted:

"Our men will be here by night. We must not leave this place. As soon as it gets dark we'll repair the break in the line and start correcting the fire." He smiled and added: "Oh, and I'll get it from the Divisional Commander for going forward!"

"Sh-sh ..." hissed Chibiryov.

Footsteps resounded on the staircase. They stopped before the fourth floor. In the silence of the empty house Chibiryov heard the Germans talking.

"Wo hast du diese Leckereien gepackt?"*

"Hier unten, im Laden."

"Dort liegt eine Leiche."

"Jawohl...."

"If only they don't notice the wire..." whispered Chibiryov.

"They'll think it's their own," said Lubentsov.

The footsteps and the conversation died down.

There was only one thing to do: wait for darkness. Lubentsov again began to watch through the window. The German defence system became clearer and clearer. The Germans were holding out only by means of well concealed manoeuvres with tanks and infantry. Hardly had our attack in this area petered out, when the Germans would run along the trenches—and the streets were crisscrossed with trenches—somewhere towards the south, to another threatened area. Tanks, taking cover behind the houses would rush there as well.

Time passed unbearably slowly. Chibiryov sat motionless on the floor, with his arms round his knees.

Our shells began to burst nearer the house—at first to the right, then to the left. In spite of the almost continuous roar of artillery, Lubentsov dozed off without noticing it.

The Germans had apparently decided that a Russian attack was again about to begin in this area, and once more soldiers came running up from all sides of the besieged town and the tanks began to assemble.

Lubentsov opened his eyes and looked impatiently at what was happening. As a scout he had never been in such a favourable position. And he was powerless to do anything!

* "Where did you get those sweets?"

"Here, downstairs in the shop."

"There's a corpse lying there."

"Yes...."

It soon grew quiet again. As soon as it was dark something would have to be done. There were three possibilities: break through to their own lines, repair the break in the wire and stay here correcting the fire, or, finally, simply wait here doing nothing until our men arrived. Lubentsov dismissed the third. After a little thought he resolved upon the second.

At last it began to grow dark. The two scouts became more and more watchful and tense. They looked in silence at each other until their faces faded into indistinct blobs. Then both stood up in the thickening darkness and Lubentsov said:

"Repair the break and come back. If you can't find the other end, come back just the same."

Chibiryov left. The darkness grew thicker still. For a time Lubentsov forced himself not to touch the receiver. He slowly counted five hundred. At last he picked up the receiver. Not a sound. Not a hint of life. Chibiryov did not come back. Somewhere a machine gun started up. Then a burst from a sub-machine gun sounded not far off. And again silence.

Lubentsov stood up, took hold of the wire and began to descend the stairs noiselessly. The wire slid slowly through his hand.

Passing through the open door of the shop Lubentsov went out into the street.

At that moment two long bursts of automatic fire roared out not far away, followed by the deafening explosion of a grenade, frightened cries in German—and immediately afterwards, a shout. Only Chibiryov could have uttered that shout, although the voice was not his but quite different, not human. He shouted only one word—a native Russian word in that German corpse-strewn slum:

"Away! . . ."

Lubentsov froze to the spot. His brain worked quite clearly. Why should Chibiryov shout "away" to the Germans? Lubentsov realized that Chibiryov had shouted not to the Germans but to him. He had shouted loudly so that Lubentsov whom he thought to be on the top floor, should hear him. In that shout there was no fear—there was dauntless courage and one last overwhelming wish: that Lubentsov should hear.

Sub-machine guns began to clatter wildly. As if in fright a gun fired about ten shells, rockets burst in the sky and it became as light as day. "I can't go to the front line, I'll be killed." Lubentsov jumped to one side, ran round the corner of the house, crawled past the petrol station and dashed into the yard, into one of the cars. He sat there for a minute until a series of rockets had fallen and then jumped out, made his way to the fence and leapt over it. The Germans were shouting all round. Another couple of dozen rockets burst in the sky and lighted up everything again. He ran along the street, jumped over one trench, another, a third, crawled between the "dragon's teeth" anti-tank blocks, sprang over a barricade like a cat, then threw himself into a gateway, opened the gate and crawled into a small courtyard full of bare flower beds and trees. Here he caught his breath and for the first time noticed that he had been hit in the right leg. But he did not yet feel any pain.

He moved on further and soon found himself in front of the blank wall of a large, half-ruined house. He crawled under the iron railings and, pushing his way through cold and thorny bushes, reached the back door. Here it was quiet. Water could be heard dripping from the gutter. Rockets were bursting far away behind him. He began to mount the stairs. His right boot was full of blood.

Just as Mitrokhin brought the Major's order to send men to objective sixty-five, Captain Meshchersky noticed that our men were retreating from the central buildings of the factory. About twenty minutes later it was clear what had happened. Lubentsov and his orderly were cut off from their own men. Meshchersky clenched his teeth and looked round helplessly. The scouts were silent. Then Mitrokhin began to recount everything in detail, what the Major of the Guards had said and how they had taken the hand-grenades in the German shop.

Meshchersky looked at the Senior Sergeant in surprise: how could Mitrokhin speak so calmly, as if he were telling of some ordinary assignment? The scouts began to put various questions to him and he answered them sensibly and in detail.

Why are they so calm, so heartless? thought Meshchersky feeling that he might cry at any moment.

"The windows of that room face the northeast," said Mitrokhin. "It's certainly a good spot: you can see everything. If you could only put a machine gun there you could do something. The Major of the Guards is all right. He's been in places twice as bad.... He'll stay there till tomorrow. Of course, it would be a good idea to give a bit of fire round the place to keep the Germans away."

Mitrokhin's last words roused Meshchersky: was the Major, who had defied so many bullets and mines, really to die in this little German hole?

"Yes, let's go to the artillerymen and see what they have to say!" he burst out.

They ran over to the artillery observers. The commander of the battalion detailed a whole battery to give covering fire on the approaches to objective sixty-five. The artilleryman was very depressed over what had hap-

pened. He knew Lubentsov well, but was not so hopeful as Mitrokhin and Meshchersky.

"Experience, of course, is a good thing," he said shaking his head. "But haven't plenty of experienced men been killed?"

Sergeant-Major Voronin rang up from the pump house. He had arrived there with prisoners. He said that the Divisional Commander had ordered Meshchersky to come and report.

Meshchersky went quickly to the Divisional Commander's O.P.

When he had heard the Captain's report, the General merely said:

"All right, you can go."

"But what about the Major of the Guards, Comrade General? Perhaps the reconnaissance company might try...."

The General interrupted him sharply:

"I forbid it!"

Seeing Meshchersky's pleading look, the General turned aside and said dryly:

"Put a dozen scouts in the grave—that's not much of an idea. You can go."

He did not say a word about Lubentsov.

Meshchersky left the Divisional Commander deeply offended and even angry with him. Downstairs, in reply to Mitrokhin's strained look, he simply waved his hand.

When Meshchersky had gone, the General sat for a while by himself, then ordered a car and drove to the front-line observation post, to the pump house. He mounted the wooden staircase. The scouts jumped up. The General looked at them very intently. The men's faces were gloomy, their clothes wet through. Antonyuk was also there.

"Binoculars!" said the General.

They gave him binoculars. He looked through them and asked quietly, not addressing anyone in particular:

"Where's that house?"

Mitrokhin explained. The General looked for a long time at "that house," then said:

"What have you been up to? Doing away with your chief? Tonight you'll go and get him out."

"There are some deserters," said Antonyuk.

The General made no reply and began to go down the stairs. When he had gone down two steps he stopped, turned round and asked:

"What did he say on the telephone?"

Meshchersky repeated what he had already said in his report to the General:

"He said to me: 'Tell the General to attack on all sectors simultaneously.' He said that to me very insistently and even repeated it several times. Then the line broke down."

The General went to his car, which stood nearby in the hollow. When he returned he asked where Plotnikov was to be found. In the Political Department. The General rang up there:

"Lubentsov...."

"I know already," said Plotnikov in a tired voice.

The General put down the receiver and thought of Vika. Vika was very fond of Lubentsov.

Late in the evening the division chiefs gathered at the General's headquarters. They sat round the table waiting for orders. The last to arrive was Lieutenant-Colonel Sizykh. He remained standing by the wall.

When he had given orders for the following day, the General said:

"The artillery worked well."

Sizykh licked his dry lips with his tongue and only then sat down. The General said:

"And reconnaissance ... also worked well."

Antonyuk, who had been at the meeting, went away from the General with a rather unpleasant feeling. They were all so very sorry for Lubentsov and, although no one had said so, Antonyuk sensed the distinction which the General made between Lubentsov and him, Antonyuk. Of course, Antonyuk was sorry for Lubentsov too. After all the Guards Major was a just man and a good scout—true, without special training. Antonyuk—now he admitted this to himself—had learnt much from Lubentsov. The Major understood the most complicated situations in battle and was very good at distinguishing correct and important facts from incorrect and unimportant ones.

If Lubentsov had gone to Moscow, he would still be alive today.

Oganesyan was lying on his bed but, contrary to his custom, was not asleep. The new orderly, called up from the company, young Corporal Kablukov, was busy in the corner and from time to time looked sorrowfully at the Major's suitcase.

Oganesyan watched Antonyuk from under half-closed eyelids as he came in. The Major had already assumed the curt, overbearing manner which Oganesyan knew so well.

As a matter of fact, Oganesyan could not complain of Antonyuk's attitude towards him. Antonyuk had a high opinion of the interpreter's knowledge and only occasionally reproached him rather gruffly for his "civilian idleness." Now, however, he regarded Antonyuk with extreme animosity. But for that very idleness and a dislike of complicating his life, which seemed to him complicated enough already, he would have let Antonyuk hear all he thought of him.

He would have said: "Don't crow, my dear chap! You won't be the chief! You'll always be an assistant! Your bursting pomposity is too obvious to everyone, your

everlasting itch to get on.... Don't crow, they'll send somebody else down from Headquarters, just the same!"

He swore quietly in Armenian and wept. Life would be impossible without Lubentsov. And he promised himself that he would be like Lubentsov—honest, straight, tidy, kind and tireless.

Of course, it will be very difficult for me, he was saying to himself, clenching his teeth,—but I will try.... And then I'll join the Party....

At dawn the scouts returned. Leaving dirt on the floor from their clay-covered boots, they sat down on the chairs, and Meshchersky reported to Antonyuk about the night's operation.

They had got through fairly easily and crawled up to the house. They had not been inside: it was swarming with Germans. On the way back they had been fired upon. Sergiyenko was wounded.

"This must be reported to the Divisional Commander," said Antonyuk.

"He knows already."

"Where from?"

"He came up with Colonel Plotnikov to the pump house and waited there for our return." Meshchersky was silent, then said, lowering his voice almost to a whisper:

"When we had crawled up to the little white house, you know, to the entrance office, we clearly heard a shout. In my opinion it was Chibiryov who shouted."

"Of course, it was Chibiryov," said Voronin, looking out of the window.

"No doubt about it," confirmed Mitrokhin, carefully rolling a big makhorka cigarette.

Meshchersky said:

"He shouted 'away' or 'go away.' Who was he shouting to? He couldn't have seen us."

"He was threatening the Germans," suggested Mitrokhin. "Get back, you sons of...."

"He was warning the Major," said Voronin.

One of the scouts recounted in a low voice:

"After that shout the Germans made a lot of fuss. We had to lie there for about an hour and a half until they quietened down. Rockets were going up all the time. They were shooting."

The telephone buzzed. Antonyuk picked up the receiver. It was the second echelon. Unexpectedly he heard the childish voice of the Divisional Commander's daughter. She asked if they had found Lubentsov.

He answered that they had not found him and waited for her to say something else.

"That's all from me," she said finally, unconsciously imitating the General's manner of speaking on the telephone. But, breaking down, she wept bitterly.

XXIII

When Tanya learnt that Lubentsov had been to the Medical Battalion, she showed her pleasure so openly that the little nurse who broke the news was slightly embarrassed.

"An old acquaintance," Tanya explained cheerfully. "We met by chance the other day."

That the visitor had been Lubentsov, and not somebody else, was easy to guess from the description: a broad-shouldered, blue-eyed and, as the nurse put it, nice major.

However, from the girl's embarrassed expression and the fact that the Major had left so quickly, Tanya realized that the conversation had not been as she would have wished it. She looked closely at the girl and went away with a sad heart. Of course, as always in such cases, she then began to assure herself that she should be pleased by what had happened, that, if he were ready

to believe any stupid gossip straightaway, she would be better off without him.

But all the same, several times Tanya caught herself waiting for somebody. And in the end she had to admit she was hoping Lubentsov would come again.

In the meantime there was heavy fighting and the whole Medical Battalion was being rushed off its feet. Yet between operations, while the nurse was attending to the instruments, Tanya found herself asking in an indifferent voice and somewhat to her own surprise:

"Why didn't the Major wait?"

The nurse answered with forced simplicity:

"I told him you had gone. . . . He galloped off immediately without saying anything. Just turned his horse and that's all. And his orderly dashed off after him."

Examining an ampule of blood plasma under the light, Tanya inquired even more indifferently:

"And he didn't even ask where I had gone?"

The nurse understood that this was what interested Tatyana Vladimirovna most of all, and was going to make an indefinite reply: let this touch-me-not suffer a little. But suddenly feeling sorry for her, she said, kindly:

"He didn't ask anything . . . and I didn't tell him anything, I assure you."

Lorries arrived in the village to evacuate the wounded. Tanya went to the hospital platoon and, together with Masha, looked over the most heavily wounded to ascertain their "transportability." She also went up to Kallistrat Evgrafovich.

"Now you are going away too," she said.

As they examined the wounded the medical orderlies began to carry them out, one by one. Tanya ran to her own room, brought a packet of sweets from her officer's ration and gave it to the "coachman," for the road. He refused in embarrassment, then gave in and said:

"Well, thanks, Comrade Captain. I'll never forget you."

The continual opening and shutting of the door made the room cold.

Tanya said:

"Do you remember that Major who was travelling with us in the carriage? He was here yesterday in the Medical Battalion...."

Kallistrat Evgrafovich was flattered that a leading surgeon should be sitting next to him, talking with him like an equal in front of all the other wounded. He asked:

"Well, how is the Major of the Guards? He's a good man, simple, but he knows everything. How he talks German, eh? Is he well?"

"He's well," said Tanya and began to talk animatedly about Lubentsov, as if she had just seen him and had a long chat. "If he comes here again I shall tell him you were here...."

"Will he be coming?" asked the "coachman" and himself answered: "Of course he'll come ... or else you'll go and see him ... give a man a little joy."

Tanya blushed and asked whether Kallistrat Evgrafovich needed anything. He asked for a pencil as he wanted "to practise a bit on the road, writing with my left hand." She gave him a pencil.

Leaning on a medical orderly he went towards a bus. The vehicles moved off, but Tanya still stood there; she was thinking sadly that Lubentsov would not come any more. And now Kallistrat Evgrafovich had left, her last link with Lubentsov was broken.

After the wounded had been evacuated, Masha found Rutkovsky and said to him angrily:

"Have you seen Koltsova? It's terrible to look at her, she can hardly keep her feet! You might give her a few hours' rest. It's disgraceful!"

The following day Rutkovsky ordered Tanya to take a rest. Everybody was saying how overtired she looked.

When she found herself "out of work" Tanya wandered round the village all the morning, not knowing what to do with herself. Then she remembered the advice of the "coachman." And why not really go and see Lubentsov? she thought. No, she would not excuse herself, she would not say a word to him about his suspicions. After all, it was her business where she went and whom she met. She had simply learned that he had been at the Medical Battalion and decided to pay him a visit, as he had not found her in.

When she had taken this decision Tanya suddenly cheered up and felt unusually brave and independent.

She put on her coat, attached—for bravado's sake—a little pistol at her belt and leaving the Medical Battalion, went through the forest to the road. She was picked up by a jesting driver, carrying "ein-zwei-drei"—his name for shells.

At Divisional Headquarters she began a cautious conversation about the positions of the neighbouring divisions. The Chief of the Operations Department gladly explained the situation to her.

"This is where we are attacking," he drew a fat finger across the map, "here is Sereda.... And here...."

To the rest she listened inattentively, although the Lieutenant-Colonel explained the situation developing at the front at great length. She noted in which village General Sereda had his Headquarters, and was about to leave; but the signals chief detained her, complaining of a pain in his wounded leg. Other patients turned up, and kept Tanya busy until midday.

At last she left the village. She succeeded in halting a car belonging to General Sereda's division. She was lucky: the car was going to Headquarters. Tanya jumped out in the middle of the village street. Outside one of the

houses stood a sedan car, and Tanya went up to the driver who was busy at the open bonnet.

"Tell me, please," she said, "where are your scouts quartered?"

"And where are you from?" asked the driver.

She did not know what to answer but at that moment a tall general with a black moustache, wearing a *papakha*, came out of the house. Catching sight of a young woman in a long German waterproof cape, General Sereda was rather surprised.

"Have you come to see me?" he asked.

"I am looking for your reconnaissance section," and, looking him boldly in the eyes, she said: "I want to see Major of the Guards Lubentsov."

"Come in, please," said the General after a pause.

She followed him into the house. Passing through a short corridor, with a soldier sitting at the window who jumped up on their arrival, they came into a large room. There was no one there. On a desk stood a field telephone.

The General stopped:

"Major of the Guards Lubentsov?" he asked again, and then, again pausing for a minute, he added: "Please, sit down."

She remained standing.

"Please, sit down," he repeated sternly and began to delve in his map-case on the table, as if it were from there that he was about to produce Major of the Guards Lubentsov.

She felt disconcerted under his strange, attentive glance and decided that some kind of explanation was needed.

"The Major of the Guards and I," she said sitting down on the edge of the chair, "are old acquaintances. Ever since '41. We made our way out of the encirclement together, near Moscow. Comrade Lubentsov came to see me recently at the Medical Battalion and this is

my return visit, so to speak. Don't trouble, I will find the reconnaissance section myself. Please, excuse me for detaining you."

Tanya could not understand this attentive General's stubborn silence. While explaining the cause of her visit she had been looking at his map-case, but finally she raised her head and met the General's eyes. And suddenly she saw something which made her stop short. There was something strange and sad in those clever, vigilant eyes.

The General said:

"Lubentsov has apparently been killed. It happened yesterday."

The telephone rang but the General did not pick up the receiver and the telephone rang and rang.

"How sorry I am!" she said.

She kept sitting there although she knew that she must leave, that it was time to leave and there was no point in sitting there detaining the General. But she had no strength to rise and no desire to do anything, not even to get up from the chair. The whole house was still, only the telephone kept ringing from time to time.

At length she stood up, said good-bye and went out.

In the street she had an attack of nerves and her teeth started to chatter; she could hardly restrain her shivering as she passed the officers who were running about the village. She wanted to sit somewhere alone, but there were probably people in all the houses.

Then her glance fell on a strange kind of barn with a yard surrounded by barbed wire. It was dark and quiet. She went in and sat on the straw covering the floor.

Her teeth chattered worse than ever.

Don't have hysterics, she told herself. She raised her head and saw Russian words on the wall, in charcoal and chalk.

"We'll never get out of here. Farewell, my native Volyn!" ran one inscription. "Dear mother!..." somebody had begun, but the rest was unreadable. And many times there was written here, in various handwritings: "Stalin."

This reminder of the endless sufferings and hopes of thousands of people affected Tanya with unusual force. It wounded, and at the same time eased, her soul. She went out and, walking slowly along the street, sobbed as bitterly as a child, heeding nobody now and paying no attention to the surprised faces of the passers-by.

XXIV

When he had dragged himself up two flights of stairs, Lubentsov heard voices below him—men's and women's. He crawled on more quickly, opened a door, found himself in a dark corridor, opened another door. In front of him was a street. That is, there was an ordinary room with a divan, a desk, chiffonier, cupboard and chairs and even pictures on the wall. But further on was the street, a lone tree and a tall, shattered house standing opposite.

There was no front wall to the room. Pieces of brick and a thick layer of dust covered the floor and the furniture. Lubentsov crawled into this strange likeness of a dwelling, as an actor steps on to the stage.

The room itself was almost undamaged. The wall had collapsed not from a direct hit but from the blast of an explosion.

From the house opposite floated the sickly-sweet stench of corpses. Now and then the distant flashes of rockets illuminated the ruins, the pattern of the wallpaper, the photographs of elderly German men and women over the desk and the picture of a naked woman hanging on the wall.

Lubentsov crawled to the edge, and looked out into the street. He was on the ground floor. The windows of the basement were visible below, piled with sandbags. Opposite, there was a stone wall belonging to the ruined house, on the only remaining side of which was plastered a huge advertisement for a shoe firm, "Salamander"—a gigantic woman's leg in a shoe. What had been the interior of the house lay inside the stone skeleton in a huge heap of rubble reaching to the second floor, from which protruded the legs of mangled bedsteads.

A trench stretched along the whole length of the street. In the courtyard of the house opposite he could see two communication trenches leading to the main building of the Albatros factory—Lubentsov recognized this building by the clock tower rising from its roof. By the same tower he was able to ascertain his own whereabouts: he was on Querstrasse. Berlinerstrasse was on his left. On the corner stood two iron lampposts with smashed lanterns.

The streets were empty. Occasionally one could hear the scraping footsteps of the Germans walking past somewhere not far away.

Lubentsov decided to take off his boot and bind up the wound. But it was impossible to take the boot off: everything had stuck together with blood. The boot had to be cut apart.

Lubentsov limped to the cupboard. In it hung men's clothes—jackets and ties. He bound up his leg with a tie, tourniquet fashion, and threw an overcoat on to his shoulders to warm himself. Then he lay down on the divan. The whole of the day's events passed before him. It was unbelievable that so much had happened in only one day, and that only this morning he had been sitting in a hollow, overgrown with bushes, beside Meshchersky and Voronin. Only a few hours ago Chibiryov's square

face was bobbing at his left shoulder. And now there was no Chibiryov and never would be.

A small dark shadow darted before his eyes. A cat, running wild, flashed along the drainpipe, stared straight into Lubentsov's face, with a look of human intelligence in its eyes, and continued its downward flight.

Lubentsov badly wanted a drink. He thought: there must be a kitchen in this flat. With a great effort he forced himself to rise and crawled towards the corridor, dragging his wounded leg. He still could not remember when he had been hit.

It was quite dark in the corridor. Lubentsov lit a match. Its yellow flame illuminated the dark walls, boxes, a silk top hat standing on the shelf of a coatstand and the shining handle of an umbrella hanging neatly on a peg.

There was a small, third door just to the right of the front door. He pushed it, it did not yield. He pushed it more firmly, and at last opened it a little. It was indeed the kitchen, but full of rubble. The ceiling, half of which had fallen in, hung downwards, exposing bent iron girders. A black hole gaped in the floor. From the opening came low voices.

He crawled noiselessly to the hole and looked down. People were sitting in the basement. An oil-lamp was burning. A completely bald, thin man with a long nose was half-lying in a rocking chair. A German woman in spectacles lay on a small couch. Beside her on bundles and pillows slept the children.

Moving as cautiously as possible, Lubentsov carefully examined the kitchen. In the cupboard stood jars with the remains of jam and sauce sticking to their sides. Near the cupboard Lubentsov felt a tap. The water supply was out of order but a small store of water had gathered in the tap and the nearby pipes, although it was half mixed with sand. Everything here was mixed with sand and brick dust, and smelt of plaster.

Returning to the room with the divan, Lubentsov lay down and for some reason began to think of his native land, of the village of Volochayevka, where he was born. He remembered the famous hill Iyun-Koran, near which he had lived as a child.

On the hill was a school where he had studied and a statue of a man carrying a banner carved in stone. This man with the banner, visible from all sides far into the taiga, on the marshy slopes and wooded fells, was the first clear memory of his childhood.

Lubentsov was so accustomed to his appearance, to his perpetually striding forward, that it seemed as if he had ceased to notice him altogether. But this image, a monument in honour of a glorious battle in the Far East, must have sunk deep into his soul, if now, when he was separated from those regions by twelve thousand kilometres and from all that life—by the front line, he should suddenly remember this very man with the banner, poised on the distant hill.

Was this a dream or reality?

In the black, log house sat his mother, all wrinkled: kindly ones round her eyes and sad ones at her mouth, wearing a shawl tied under her chin. Pacing noiselessly about the yard in his soft *ichigi** was his father, who worked as a brigade leader in the nearby state forest farm, an old partisan and hunter. He often took his son Sergei, the youngest offshoot of the Lubentsov family, with him into the taiga. They would wander together along untrodden paths, the old and the young, grey-haired and fair, setting snares for raccoons and shooting pheasants.

The Lubentsov family had given the Far East woodmen, hunters, gold prospectors and raftsmen, and later, after the revolution—captains of the Amur flotillas, fron-

* A heelless leather boot something like a moccasin.

tier guards, mechanics and even one People's Commissar. The fact that his father, Lubentsov, had fought against the Japanese in defence of the Soviet Far East, and that the Lubentsovs were scattered over the towns and villages of the huge region, and that one of them was a People's Commissar in Moscow,—all this filled Lubentsov, as a boy, with a proprietary feeling towards the world which surrounded him.

Any trouble in the school, the forest farm, the district and the whole world he took deeply to heart, like a personal matter. Somebody's dishonest act, unharvested kolkhoz wheat drenched in autumn rain, the fascist atrocities in Germany and the lynching of Negroes in America aroused within him deep indignation and a passionate desire to put things right immediately, as quickly as possible, punish the guilty and re-establish justice.

...The night dragged on terribly slowly. His head swam and an insistent, drawn-out cry resounded in his head. The General, of course, would count his scout already dead. Nothing of the kind, Taras Petrovich! Do you think it's so easy to kill Lubentsov?

Lubentsov smiled feebly at these thoughts. Had Meshchersky heard his last words on the telephone about the necessity to attack on all sectors? Had he understood the importance of these words?

Once again visions floated through Lubentsov's consciousness. The faces of the scouts, the wounded soldiers, the dead signallers and finally the face of Chibiryov—the last human face he had seen. And not so much his face as his cry. It was this cry, it seemed, that rang in his ears, like a gramophone record turning in one groove, endlessly repeating the same tune.

From time to time flashes of the rockets lit up the room faintly. Someone clattered along the pavement. Someone wept, not far away. Someone shouted gutturally in German....

Lubentsov forgot about his pain and thirst when our guns rumbled in the morning. Shells burst near the main factory building and on Seminarstrasse, where a house collapsed, spurting rubble and tongues of flame.

German soldiers ran along the communication trenches opposite, frequently appearing through gaps in the stone wall, under which the trench passed.

An officer arrived in the trench. He was very agitated. The soldiers stopped at every shell burst and flattened themselves on the ground.

Then it grew quiet for an instant. The stillness, to which Lubentsov listened with concentrated attention, soon burst into a fresh cannonade: a dry thunder, the whistle of a shell and then a distant explosion. The Germans were returning our fire. Then there was a roar of engines. A German tank stopped just outside the house, almost beside Lubentsov. In fearful haste, it began to discharge shell after shell. The picture of the naked woman, in the dark-red frame, trembled and fell to the floor.

The German system of fire became clearer than ever. At the crossroads, two houses away from Lubentsov, a machine gun, apparently of heavy calibre, was firing like mad. A second was working from the corner house of Seminarstrasse. The tank was adopting usual street fighting tactics. After firing a little, it had taken cover behind the red house on Seminarstrasse.

Lubentsov would have given half a lifetime for a telephone or a transmitter.

A body of about sixty Germans appeared in the street. They were oldish men and young boys with red-and-black armbands on their sleeves, dressed in civilian clothes, but armed with rifles. The rifles were of various types. And the people too differed greatly in size, and looked like an absurd fence built of planks of different lengths. They squawked excitedly like ducks in a marsh.

The officer marching at the head suddenly turned round to his motley band, hissed something between his teeth, and they began singing. Out of tune, plaintive, wailing trebles, ranging from old men's to those of children, mingled with quavering basses. Heavens, what a song! Your hair stood on end to hear it. As for the words, they were terribly warlike. It was the famous "Horst Wessel" song, composed in the Munich beer cellars.

Again our guns roared and the Germans, not listening to orders, jumped into the trench, pushing and jostling each other.

Lubentsov thought he could hear distant cries of "hurrah." The German machine guns fired wildly. Yet another machine gun began firing from Berlinerstrasse. The Germans again ran along the trench, making for the main building from other areas. Three tanks moved out from behind the red house and began to fire canister shells in terrible haste.

There was a lull. Lubentsov was feverish. The cold sun hung above his head.

A group of officers appeared out of a side street. In front marched a tall SS man in a black uniform, black cap and dark glasses. He marched with a firm tread, the others following behind him at a slight distance.

Another group approached to meet them. Some soldiers with rifles were leading two unarmed soldiers.

The SS man in dark glasses stopped by this second group and shouted something. One of the arrested men, a fat, elderly man without a hat, fell on his knees. The second, a tall lad about fifteen years old, began to cry. His face was stained with blood.

They dragged them to the crossroads. There was some noise. Beside the iron lampposts at the crossroads appeared tables and a ladder.

The SS man waved his hand and the two hanged men swung on the lampposts, with their legs tied. Then one

of the soldiers sat at the table under the hanged boy and began to write something with a fountain pen on a piece of white paper. His hand trembled. Another soldier climbed heavily on to the table and fixed the notice on the chest of the hanging boy. Then he carried the table to the second lamppost and hung a similar paper on the chest of the fat man. Then they all stood for a minute and went away. Soon German men and women crept out of the cellars. They went up to the hanged men, stood there, read and dispersed in silence.

Again evening fell. A sleepless night of expectation lay ahead. What if our men don't come tomorrow?

Lubentsov thought for the first time that—who knows what pranks the devil will play—he might not get out of this Schneidemühl. But here he checked himself. Our men would surely come tomorrow. Probably the Corps Commander and the Army Commander and Marshal Zhukov must already be asking exasperatedly: "are you going to be much longer there with Schneidemühl?"

However insignificant Schneidemühl might be on the scale of the whole enormous front, Stalin must have this little place on his map as well. And most probably the great leader, the Supreme Commander-in-Chief, too, was asking the Commander of the Front and the member of the Military Council—just by the way, in connection with other, vastly more important, matters:

"How are you getting on with the siege of Schneidemühl?"

The night passed. It was morning. And all round there was almost complete silence. Lubentsov listened in vain for a welcome sound from the outside world. Our artillery was silent. Traffic in the streets increased. The Germans felt no need to keep their heads down, talked loudly and acted as if the worst for them was over.

Towards evening, German "J-52" transport planes began to appear over Schneidemühl. The Germans crept out from the cellars and archways on to the street, and waved their handkerchiefs in welcome. Dozens of parachutes, white and red, detached themselves from the planes which circled over the town. They floated lower and lower, fluttering in the gusts of the cold wind. Boxes were tied to parachutes—apparently ammunition and food for the besieged town.

It was very quiet, even the machine guns were silent. And a strange thought came to Lubentsov, who was shaking from an attack of fever: But what if our men are going to abandon the siege tonight? Not knowing why, he recalled a thin unshaven face which he had recently seen. The man, it seemed, had been called Schwalbe. Yes, Helmut Schwalbe, Oberfeldwebel of the 25th Infantry Division. When questioned, he had said in a low, insane voice:

"In the dark mine shafts a secret weapon is being forged which will save Germany."

"Nonsense," said Lubentsov aloud.

And, to punish himself for the moment of weakness, he decided to climb up at night to some higher part of the building. A scout could not lie in a slum, without seeing or knowing what was going on around him.

He counted his grenades. There were four of them. Seven rounds in his pistol. Good. With one of the grenades he could, if need be, blow himself up. He chose the grenade to be reserved for himself. It was a marked grenade, a twig had once protruded from its wooden handle. Now it was all smoothly planed but the brown knot remained to remind one that this deadly piece of work had once been a green and leafy tree. He put this grenade into his pocket, apart from the others.

When it grew dark Lubentsov slid off the divan, threw the German overcoat on to his shoulders, and crawled. In the corridor he took the umbrella from its peg: it would serve instead of a stick. After listening to some indistinct noises, he unlocked and opened the hall door. Quiet, dark and wet. He crawled up the staircase very slowly—not so much out of cautiousness, as from pain and weakness.

On the third floor Lubentsov saw the night sky above him: half a floor had been torn away by a shell. On the staircase some steps were missing, but above and around hung iron girders with huge pieces of wall sticking to them. He surmounted this obstacle with difficulty, holding on to one of the girders.

The whole fourth floor squeaked and groaned. In a room without walls stood some furniture: an armchair, a baby's pram. The flash of a rocket lighted up a doll in a blue dress, dangling from a cornice by her pigtails.

At the end of the corridor a door, flung wide open, led on to a balcony. Lubentsov went up to it and saw an iron fire escape. It was a good two metres to the roof. Lubentsov began to climb, grasping the wet iron with almost numb hands.

The roof here was undamaged. Further on there was a dark gap. It was windy. Lubentsov stood up to his full height at the chimney, trying to see or hear something. But complete silence reigned all round. If only he could hear a burst of tracer bullets, just one gunshot. Nothing.

Lubentsov sat down to wait for the dawn. The sheet-iron bent slightly under his feet, and Lubentsov remembered how, as a boy, he loved to climb on the roof drumming merrily on the iron and imagining himself a scout or a partisan, as he took cover behind a chimney and then crawled slowly out from behind it....

Lubentsov sat waiting for the dawn. The minutes dragged by very slowly. Once the moon appeared from

behind the clouds but vanished again immediately. Damp snow fell. Somewhere a part of a wall collapsed. The roar resounded along the lifeless, half-ruined back streets, and died away in the distance. Lubentsov sat still, scarcely thinking of anything, just waiting. It grew colder and colder. Somewhere downstairs someone was coughing heavily. Then the sky began to pale slightly and the darkness of the night to retire into the dark back streets, growing still thicker there, while the rest of the sky seemed to fade and buildings became more and more prominent. On the eastern horizon, behind the forests where Tanya was, there appeared a long, heavy layer of orange light. The west was still buried in darkness, but in the east the orange strip grew larger and lighter, gradually lost its gloomy hue and became yellower and warmer.

The sun began to sparkle on the steeples of the German churches.

Lubentsov sat still, waiting for it to grow light in the west. The western horizon, too, began to clear a little.

Lubentsov stood up. It was the first time he had seen the Soviet positions from such a height from behind the enemy's lines. The trenches stretched over the slope of a low hill. Men scurried about like ants among the far buildings of the factory. Lubentsov could not distinguish their faces or even their clothes, but he felt immediately that they were Russians. He saw the pump house, damaged by German shells, and it seemed to him that in the rays of the rising sun he caught the glint of a telescope.

Lubentsov had a high fever and his wounded leg seemed to be throbbing painfully. But he forgot this. He was in the grip of other, greater powers. He was no longer alone and lost among the enemy. He felt a shiver of delight and pride for his people, for their leader and the invincible force he had forged. And to Lubentsov in

his feverish half-delirium, it seemed that he was not on the roof of a ruined German house but on a far-away hill near Volochayevka, and that it was he who was the man with the banner, poised there, striding forward.

The Soviet soldiers were pulling up the guns by hand, dragging them determinedly right up to the factory buildings. From above, it seemed that the soldiers were bewitched, that someone had charmed them against death. But the German machine gun and artillery fire was becoming fiercer and fiercer. And now our soldiers would fall but rise again. Not all of them rose, but Lubentsov did not see this from above. Now here, now there, they appeared like black dots; ran across, crawled doggedly, advanced stubbornly, disappeared, appeared again out of shell craters, from behind piles of bricks, vanished into houses, jumped out in the most unexpected places and at the most unexpected moments.

The lampposts with the hanged men collapsed, struck by a shell.

Above all the sounds of the battle—the howl of the faustpatrones, the explosions, the rumble of falling buildings, the cough of the mortars—the mad rattle of a machine gun dinned especially near and sharply in Lubentsov's ears. It was that same heavy-calibre machine gun, which, as Lubentsov had noticed yesterday, was mounted in the basement at the crossroads, about two hundred metres from the house where he was standing.

Lubentsov began to get down from the roof in the same way as he had come up. In the house itself it was still dark. And he felt as if he were in a deep dungeon while a fierce storm raged all round.

Lubentsov thrust his cap into his pocket, put on the German overcoat and buttoned it and, leaning on the umbrella, went down the stairs and came out into the courtyard.

A young girl ran past him with a bundle on her shoulders. She said something to him but he walked on. The girl disappeared.

He went on, limping and clenching his teeth, climbed over a fence and found himself in another courtyard where a few Germans were fussing about, most of them old. He walked on past them. Again someone noticed that he was limping badly and asked him something. He went on in silence past the Germans and before their eyes climbed over the next fence with the help of the umbrella, still clenching his teeth.

This was the yard where the machine gun was.

The yard was separated from the street by a paling, along which a trench had been dug. From the trench to the yard there was a communication trench which afterwards turned off to the left and ended in a small garden. Two Germans were standing in the communication trench. They had been dragging a box which apparently contained cartridges, and had now stopped to rest. Something in the face of this limping man with his overcoat buttoned to the neck, without a hat to cover his tousled fair hair, attracted their attention. They looked at him intently. He went past them, not stopping for an instant, and only when the soldiers were behind him did he realize that through the slit in the overcoat it was possible to see his Soviet uniform trousers. He forced himself to go more slowly.

He walked slowly along the yard with a numb face, feeling cold at the back of his neck from the glances of the Germans. No, they had not noticed anything.

Fortunately, at this moment shells began bursting all round. Everyone took cover wherever they could find it; then the soldiers began to run: evidently the Russians were near. And only this man with the tousled fair hair walked slowly across the courtyard to the open back door of the house.

As he went into the house the Major noticed in front of him one flight of steps leading upwards and another, to the left, leading downwards. Further on, a door on the left led into the basement. There, below, the machine gun was fairly gasping with exertion. Plaster was falling from the ceiling.

Lubentsov opened the door, closed it behind him and leaned on the doorpost to regain his breath and give his leg a rest. Then he looked into the semidarkness. The silhouettes of two soldiers over a machine gun were outlined against the basement window in the background. Lubentsov moved to the right along the wall, resting his back against it, and then stopped to prime his grenade. The machine gun rattled. The basement trembled slightly.

Lubentsov threw the grenade and fell prone on the floor. The explosion shook the whole house, hurled Lubentsov himself to one side, deafening him. Coming to himself after a minute he primed a second grenade and crawled to the window. Germans were dashing about the crossroads, escaping where they could. He threw one grenade, then another among them, then thought for a second and pulled from his pocket the last, marked one, and threw that, too, into the street, at the crowd of running Germans....

Captain Chokhov, breaking through with the Second Company among the backyards to Berlinerstrasse saw the explosions of the grenades and thought enviously that someone had contrived to break into the town before him. Nonetheless he did not fail to make use of this unexpected help, and rushed forward. The company took the crossroads and moved further on, down the adjoining street.

In the basement of one of the houses the soldiers discovered the division reconnaissance officer, Major Luben-

tsov, who had been missing for three days. He was wounded and very weak. Near him lay two dead Germans and a destroyed German machine gun.

They brought stretchers.

"Get better," Chokhov said to him in farewell. "Very glad you are alive."

The battle for the town lasted another forty-eight hours. Towards evening on the second day the firing abated. A group of German transport planes appeared and threw down parachutes carrying a load of butter and cheese, to the great satisfaction of the soldiers.

The evening turned out surprisingly warm. On the Hindenburgplatz they joined hands with the division storming the town from the south.

Among the soldiers of this division, who appeared from behind the huge bulk of the cathedral, Chokhov recognized the ginger-moustached Siberian, his fellow traveller in the carriage. Ginger recognized the Captain immediately and saluted him.

"Still alive?" asked Chokhov.

"Of course," answered Ginger, smiling and wiping his sweating brow.

"It's too late for us to die now. We'll go on to Berlin, eh?"

"Berlin can wait. Better take Schneidemühl first."

"Schneidemool? Schneidemool is as good as taken already...."

And, joining his own men, he disappeared among the ruins.

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White Flags



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I

THE HUSHED German towns and villages met the Russian soldiers with white flags. White flags fluttered from the windows, balconies and eaves, hung limply in the snow and rain and gleamed spectrally in the darkness of the nights. Germany had not yet surrendered but every German house was capitulating by itself, as if avoiding the avenging hand, as if saying: "Do what you like with the Nazis, but don't touch me! . . ."

The further they went westwards the more lively the roads of Germany became.

The Soviet troops met columns of Poles and Italians, Norwegians and Serbs, Frenchmen and Bulgarians, Croats and Dutchmen, Belgians and Czechs, Rumanians and Danes, Slovaks, Greeks and Slovenes.

Men, women and children, old men and old women, boys and girls, walked with bicycles and barrows, rucksacks and suitcases. The colours of all the nationalities of the world had been tacked on coats, on nondescript uniforms with no epaulets, on jackets and raincoats, on dresses and blouses. People sang, shouted and talked in a score of languages, as they made their way along, in different directions but to the same destination: home.

As soon as, in the distance, they saw our soldiers or heard the roar of the red-starred tanks, the Czechs would start to shout: "Mye Czeshi!"; the French: "Français!"—

and all the others, each one in his own language, would proclaim their nationality as a sign of brotherhood and as a shield.

Even the Italians, Hungarians and Rumanians, the recent allies of Hitler, guiltily, not very joyfully, but nevertheless hastily, announced their national allegiance. Europe rejoiced to feel herself free and was proud that Soviet divisions had come here to liberate her, pouring in an irresistible flood along all the roads of Germany.

But then there appeared round a bend a crowd of people under a red flag.

These were Russians. Former prisoners of war on crutches, women and children, young lads from Smolensk, Kharkov, Krasnodar, girls with white shawls tied under their chins.

Everything stopped. The soldiers surrounded them, embraces and kisses followed, tears flowed. A young girl traffic regulator dropped her little flag and stood quite still with wet cheeks.

Hurried inquiries were made: who was from Smolensk, who from Poltava, who from the Don. People from the same part of the country discovered each other, some were almost relations, "second cousins twice removed." Russians, so long separated from their native land, fingered the soldiers' and officers' shoulder tabs with surprise; the little boys lovingly stroked the barrels of Soviet sub-machine guns; the girls' cheeks flushed in pink confusion under the delighted eyes of the soldiers.

And what miracles don't happen in the world! An elderly sergeant jumped down from a lorry which was towing a huge gun. And at that moment a young, fair-haired girl dashed towards him, as if this were just what she had been waiting for. The whole artillery regiment stopped as if it had become rooted to the ground and around father and daughter, who were now in each other's arms, resounded a thunderous "hurrah."

Near this group walked another girl, dark, beautiful, with a white shawl falling over her shoulder, who kept on saying in Ukrainian:

"What good fortune! And isn't my father here?"

She ran along the column, looking into the faces of the gunners and infantry, asking all the while:

"Isn't my father here?"

"Don't you want a husband?" asked a young voice from a lorry and a red, smiling face with a cheery freckled nose, the nose of an amiable joker, popped out from under a tarpaulin.

Traffic was thoroughly jammed.

At this moment a car, with an armoured troop carrier, drove up to the crossroads. A General stepped out of it. Making his way through the crowd to the traffic regulator, he said severely:

"You must not forget your job."

Many officers recognized the General. It was the member of the Military Council. They all grew quiet. Sizokrylov turned to those who had been liberated:

"Don't hold up the soldiers, comrades, they have a lot to do ahead. Unit commanders, to me!"

Infantry and artillery commanders ran up to the member of the Military Council. He gave them a severe reprimand for allowing such disorder.

"Where is the commander of the artillery regiment?" he asked.

Someone ran to look for the commander of the artillery regiment. The General stood aside, leaving the officers to restore order.

The command rang out:

"Attention!"

"To your vehicles!"

Everything moved slowly. Only the father and the daughter were left in the middle of the road. He was helplessly and gently pushing her away, saying something

to her in a quiet voice and looking anxiously at the General.

"Why has the regiment stopped?" Sizokrylov asked the artillery Colonel, who had run up.

"It is my fault, Comrade General."

"I know that it is your fault," retorted the General coldly. "You have not only delayed yourselves, you have created a bottleneck. Such a commander is not worth a farthing!"

A few generals drove up in cars, commanders of the formations using the road. The generals tried to present a report to the member of the Military Council but Sizokrylov did not listen to them. He walked up to the elderly sergeant with his daughter standing in the middle of the road, and said:

"What, been lucky, soldier? But the war has still got to be finished."

The Sergeant raised his hand hastily to his cap and glancing once more at his daughter climbed into the lorry. The cheery nose then quickly disappeared under the tarpaulin.

The crossroads emptied—and just in time. German bombers appeared in the sky. True, they only dropped two bombs in all before Soviet fighters drove them off.

The member of the Military Council turned to the generals and political workers:

"Speed is now most important of all. We must keep to the timetable. Repatriated persons must keep to the sides of the road and not hinder the movement of the troops. The units' political departments are responsible for the work among repatriated persons and must organize meetings. But all this must be done without interfering with the units' advance to the Oder."

After the member of the Military Council had driven away, officers and generals stood and consulted together

for a while and, to tell the truth, shook their heads: "Oh, he's strict! You can't get round him!"

When General Sizokrylov arrived in Landsberg, he telephoned for the Colonel in charge of the repatriation department. The Colonel arrived by plane. He did not walk into the General's room, he ran in. It was written all over his shining face how proud and happy he was that it had fallen to his lot to play such a historic rôle: that of sending liberated Soviet people home.

The member of the Military Council said:

"I have been asking some repatriates where they were going. Unfortunately they do not all know their assembly points. Some of them had not received the ration allotted to them. And yet you have enough officers, supplies and transport." Looking at the Colonel with some contempt, Sizokrylov raised his voice: "Your officers, Colonel, are becoming too sentimental. Forgive me, I should have said: stupidly sentimental. The soldiers may, in this case, allow themselves to show their feelings; it's quite natural that Soviet people should be happy in fulfilling their great mission. There is nothing, however, for Bolshevik leaders to be sentimental about; we must carry out the task entrusted to us by the Party. You must organize the work so that liberated people from the camps are well fed and content and that they know for sure that they will soon be home. And do it in such a way that they do not hinder troop movements, on which the rapid elimination of the calamities of war depends."

Must be made of stone, thought the Colonel feeling offended, as he stood at attention before the member of the Military Council.

Sizokrylov drove on further. To stifle the unwanted wave of feeling which rose in him as he looked at the soldiers and crowds of liberated people moving along the road, he thought, as usual, of the vast variety of matters

to be attended to. True, he did not always succeed in diverting his thoughts.

Sizokrylov, a man whose whole life was linked with the Party, was happy that Soviet troops, led by Communists, were liberating the world from fascism. He considered this natural, just as natural as the fact that Communists were at the head of the partisan movement in all countries. Communism was a force liberating the world. It was essential that Soviet people should set an example to all others in the fulfilling of their duty, and in their moral purity—in all those qualities which they had acquired by living in a free country.

Love of people? Yes. But an active love, with a clear purpose. A fight against evil, but a fight conducted by the state under the leadership of a powerful party, for here, as historical experience had confirmed, good wishes could not help. Only iron military and political organization could help here.

Although the General had not heard what was said of him in connection with his orders, instructions and strict warnings, he guessed it and it hurt him. He was not indifferent to what was said about him by that sergeant who had met his daughter, and the various officers and generals whom he met. But he could not be swayed by it. They did not know and could not know what he knew.

And the situation at the front was this: the task set by the Supreme Commander-in-Chief had been carried out—tank units had broken through to the Oder, forced the river and, together with advanced units of Guards infantry, had seized small bridgeheads on its west bank. The Germans were continually throwing strong forces against our troop formations on the west bank of the Oder. The main thing now was to hold and expand the bridgeheads. Speed in bringing up troops was therefore decisive.

Last night Sizokrylov had called on the Commander of the Front who had just received the first news of the events on the Oder. They sat together in silence, waiting for confirmation of the still hazy and incomplete reports. The huge headquarters was quiet. At last the stillness was broken by a loud slamming of doors, and excited questions:

"Where is the Commander?"

"Come in!" shouted the Commander and threw open the door.

The Chief of Staff had arrived together with an officer of the operations department, who had flown here from the Oder in a fast fighterplane. He brought with him the invaluable, and as yet the only, map, with positions of the units hastily noted down upon it.

The bridgehead existed! Still an unsteady, twisting ribbon stuck to the Oder, but it existed.

As always in such cases, information began to arrive in an ever-increasing stream: liaison officers, radio, telephone and telegraph constantly brought in more and more details.

The Commander was called to the telephone by Comrade Stalin.

After listening to the report the Supreme Commander-in-Chief ordered that the bridgehead should be expanded, that it should be given air cover and greatly consolidated. Clearly it would not be advisable to move forward to Berlin without previous preparation, bearing in mind the exposed right flank, which afforded the enemy certain advantages. The Supreme Commander-in-Chief emphasized the last words.

Among other questions, Stalin asked how the siege of Schneidemühl was progressing, and the Commander reported that the operation would be finished within the next two or three days.

Such was the situation at the front.

The next day Sizokrylov drove up to the Oder.

Innumerable Alt-, Neu-, Klein- and Gross-, Ober- and Nieder -bergs, -dorfs, -stadts, -walds, -hausens, -hofs and -aus flashed past. Small towns with tiled roofs went by with the inevitable monuments either to Frederick II or William I or Bismarck or the Kurfürst of Brandenburg, who were always either "the great," "the iron" or "the invincible." In almost every town stood monuments to the German soldiers of 1813, 1866, 1870-1871 or 1914-1918, from the "grateful fatherland" and "thankful fellow citizens."

Although these monuments had been erected quite recently, they were loaded with all the accessories of the romantic Middle Ages: rusty swords, shields and coats of armour. Cast iron eagles soared above the stone pedestals.

There was not a single monument to a poet or a musician. For the outside world Germany had once been the land of Goethe, Beethoven and Dürer, but here ruled Frederick, Bismarck and Moltke. Those who had lost the battle of the Marne had also acquired monuments and laurel wreaths and were celebrated as victors.

General Sizokrylov examined his surroundings with deep interest and meditated upon Germany.

It was difficult of course to gain a clear idea of her on the basis of fleeting impressions. The General was travelling all the time. Occasionally he did stop on service matters, now in one army unit, now at field aerodromes. Besides, he knew that the "spiritual" centre of the country was further on—across the Oder, on the Elbe and on the Rhine; the Germany of the junkers which stretched along the Oder on the east had for ages given the "Vaterland" only pigs and soldiers.

However one thing was clear: the inhabitants of these parts, the owners of these abandoned houses, the people pictured on the photographs in the fat family albums—

industrious, disciplined, rather pedantic—these very people had become a terrible weapon in the hands of the predatory and ruthless Hitler gang.

How had this great country come to such a pass? The course of its history had suddenly started swirling round like an ugly and horrible whirlpool—of course, not without the help of the golden rain of British and American loans.

Behind the fog of words, hysterical cries, demagogic tricks and lavish promises, the Germans had been unable to see the indisputable truth that Hitler was saving not Germany from the "dictates of Versailles," but the German capitalists and landlords from the German workers and peasants. They did not realize this because the degenerate leaders of Social-Democracy had succeeded in lulling their vigilance with empty promises and many years' indulgence of their worst acquisitive instincts.

Finally Hitler crushed the workers' movement, and succeeded in turning the German people's energy into a different channel—against the peoples of Europe.

Sizokrylov, of course, remembered the best people of Germany, thrown into prison and concentration camps; but he could not reconcile himself to the idea that the German working class had not stood up to the severe test. This thought tormented Sizokrylov and even, one might say, wounded his old Bolshevik's pride. He loved the working people and believed fervently in their great future. Like all Communists he had been brought up by Lenin and Stalin in a spirit of sacred respect for the working people of all nationalities. Here, however, one had to face facts. And one had to think of the future.

The defeat of Germany must become the victory of her working class, a victory over reactionary ideas and selfish interests.

It was an old habit of Sizokrylov's to share all his impressions with his wife and son. But his son was no

longer alive. And, after all, he had died for the same cause for which the Hamburg worker, Ernst Thälmann, had died. Do the German workers understand that and will they ever understand it? They will, they must understand.

The General could not write to his wife either. He knew he should tell her of their son's death, but he kept on delaying and putting it off. He was simply afraid. He felt she would not survive this grief. And, while telling himself that now there were many suffering mothers and yet they still went on living, he thought sadly: No, *she* will not survive it.

Soon Sizokrylov was diverted from all such thoughts by important news brought specially by an officer from the Commander of the Front.

Yes, Stalin's warning had been accurate and timely. Events of the greatest importance were undoubtedly taking place on the wide strip along the Baltic coast to the east of the Oder, which had not yet been taken by our troops and over which German units, fleeing to Swinemünde and Stettin, were retreating. German troops were concentrating there.

Radio intelligence had detected nearly thirty new headquarters in the Stargard-Stettin area. The air force, too, had reported that the enemy's tanks and infantry were moving in considerable strength from the neighbourhood of Berlin to the northeast. A battalion of tanks sent out on reconnaissance in the vicinity of Pyritz was attacked by German tank units of unknown identity.

More: Moscow sent news that British naval intelligence was also sounding a warning, of a somewhat panicky nature, about danger from the north. A gigantic figure was named: One and a half thousand German tanks were concentrated on the coast, according to them.

Sizokrylov was surprised by such unexpected and uninvited solicitude on the part of the allies, and then realized that they were worried by the Soviet bridgehead

on the western bank of the Oder. Apparently, they were calculating that the Soviet Command, frightened by the threat from the north, would divert troops to the east bank, thus depriving themselves of the chance to begin an immediate advance on Berlin. The English and Americans—not from considerations of prestige but with another far-reaching aim—were eager to take the enemy capital themselves.

The Commander communicated, further, that he had ordered troops to be transferred to the north and was going there himself. At the same time the Supreme High Command sent instructions to persist with the expanding and strengthening of the Oder bridgehead, and to continue military operations for the capture of the German fortresses of Küstrin and Frankfort on the Oder.

Sizokrylov decided to continue his journey to the Oder where the fate of the future advance on Berlin was being decided.

Before leaving he summoned the chiefs of counter-intelligence. He told them that while travelling about behind the front lines, he had seen many wandering groups of people belonging to the local German population.

Families with their household bag and baggage were on the move, keeping to the village byways. This, however, was natural in the present circumstances.

Among them the General had met young Germans as well. They were in civilian clothes, but even an inexperienced eye could detect their military bearing.

"Among these men," said the General, "there may be war criminals and those who are simply spies. The German command is still in existence and there is no reason to count on its inactivity."

The counterintelligence officers reported to the General that measures had already been taken. In fact, they had succeeded in catching quite a few officers disguised in civilian clothes in Schwerin, Landsberg, Königswalde and

Königsberg in Neumark (a small town thus called to distinguish it from the Prussian Königsberg). Furthermore, in one village house two German spies had been arrested who had given valuable information. An influential Hitlerite industrialist escaping from Silesia, one of the heads of the local branch of the "Hermann Göring" concern, and a number of other people, ex-commandants, sub-commandants and sonderführers had also been detained. All these people wanted to reach the Americans advancing in the west.

"They seem to think our American allies will take them under their wing," said a counterintelligence colonel.

The General looked at him, shook his head expressively and said:

"Unfortunately they have reason to think so. . . ."

After the conversation with the counterintelligence officers the General drove to a camp full of allied air force prisoners of war, freed by our troops.

The camp was situated in a factory settlement of two-storied brick houses. Even when he was still some way off the General heard an incredible hubbub of singing and shouting.

There was hilarious rejoicing in the camp. American and British airmen were strolling about the street with their arms round each other, shouting and chattering loudly.

Their joy was perfectly natural. The Germans had been just about to put them in lorries and send them further on, to the west, when a lone Russian tank had burst into the camp. At first they did not even realize that it was a Russian tank. When the tank approached, the Americans took to their heels, thinking that the Germans were going to annihilate them before they retreated.

The tank stood still for a minute as if it were sniffing the air with its huge gun barrel, then cut right into the midst of the German guards. Then it moved back,

rumbled a little, charged the house where the Germans were hiding in fear, floored it like a boxer dealing a smashing blow on the jaw, turned round, fired two shells at the lorries waiting in the road to receive the prisoners of war, after which it went away.

In vain the Americans and British rushed after it, shouting words of gratitude and wanting to drag from the steel giant these fine fellows who had freed two hundred imprisoned airmen so unexpectedly, calmly and cheerfully. The fine fellows, it turned out, had other things to do. They crushed a German anti-aircraft gun with their tracks and disappeared round a bend in the road.

When Soviet troops arrived, the British and American airmen insistently asked all the Russian officers who came to the camp to find out who, after all, had been sitting in that tank. Funnily enough, the British and Americans obviously considered the saving of two hundred Anglo-Saxons almost the greatest triumph of the war.

The Soviet officers waved the question aside:

"Oh, well, what does it matter!"

The airmen were informed that several Douglasses were ready for them and that they would soon be taken to the aerodrome.

When the General arrived, the British and Americans stood at attention and saluted him—each in their own fashion: the Americans with a light movement of the right palm towards their foreheads, the English by woodenly swinging the arm, with a rather out-turned palm, up to their caps.

Sizokrylov stepped out of his car, shook hands with the allied officers lined up to receive him, and asked through the interpreter if they needed anything.

A tall Englishman, Sir Reginald Tangle, Group Captain of the Royal Air Force, answered him.

They were in no need of anything and thanked the Soviet Command for the friendly care and true comradely

treatment. But they had one request: if possible, they would like to send messages by telegraph to their relatives that they were alive and well. The General agreed and proposed that his adjutant should be given a list of the names and ranks of all those present. These would all be telegraphed to Moscow, to the British and American military missions.

An American Major wearing spectacles had another request: could he avoid being sent away for the time being? Say, it was a damn shame to get out at such a moment! If the General had no objections he would take service—temporarily—in the Soviet Air Force, so as to meet the Americans on the Oder and then go over to his own men.

"On the Oder?" asked the General. "There are no Americans on the Oder. There are Germans there. We shall probably meet the Americans on the Elbe."

"That means you will be taking Berlin?" asked another Major, an Englishman.

The General looked at him keenly and answered in a monosyllable.

"Yes."

The talk went on politely and quietly, but suddenly a disturbance occurred in the ranks of the allied officers. Slightly drunk sergeants and lieutenants, who had been crowding behind the colonels and majors, rushed forward, pushing aside their seniors in rank, and surrounded the General, wildly shaking his hand and those of the Soviet officers standing beside him. The meeting immediately lost its official atmosphere. The air resounded with joyful cries and interjections:

"Thanks, buddies!"

"Long live Russia!"

Group Captain Sir Reginald Tangley shook his head disapprovingly but immediately began smiling again politely, and rather condescendingly, as one smiles at a

child's naughtiness. He smiled even more broadly when he noticed that the General was watching him. Finally his smile reached enormous dimensions when he saw that the Soviet soldiers moving along the road were waving their hands in greeting to the liberated allied officers. Only his ears prevented the further expansion of his smile.

Russian soldiers poured along the road in a ceaseless stream. In the amiable and friendly expressions on their faces, Tangley read something which showed an awareness of strength. The Russians marched on unhurriedly, but stubbornly and confidently, examined everything around them with calm, slightly cunning eyes. Their capes flapped loudly in the wind.

Tangley remembered the innumerable conversations among senior British officers to the effect that Russia would come out of this war bled white. It does not look like it, he thought now and suddenly felt a gnawing disquiet: They have gone a long way into Europe!...

His smile began to shrink.

Then the General began to smile. And now it turned out that he, with his severe face, could convey a little malice and a great deal of understanding with his smile. The Englishman began to feel slightly uncomfortable.

At this moment buses arrived which had been sent to transfer the allied officers to the aerodrome, and Sizokrylov drove on further.

III

Owing to the developments in the northern sector, the men resting in Schneidemühl after the capture of the town received the order to march.

The regiment's Chief of Staff, Major Migayev, arriving by night from the Divisional Headquarters, called the

commanders of the battalions, companies and batteries together and read out the order.

The commanders, sitting sedately in leather armchairs in the directors' room of a Schneidemühl bank, where the Regimental Headquarters was billeted, noted down on pads and maps all that was necessary and did not ask questions, for they were accustomed to discipline. Backing up every phrase, as was his custom, with the words, "so that's that," Migayev gave directions for the march. Then he asked rather sadly:

"Any questions?"

"Everything is clear," the Commander of the Second Battalion answered for everyone.

And only the boyish and gloomy voice of the new captain—the Commander of the Second Company—was heard from a far corner. It was not even a question but rather a grim statement of fact:

"Not towards Berlin, then."

Migayev stirred. That was what he himself had been thinking of, bitterly.

"That's just it," said Migayev, "it means not towards Berlin. So that's that."

It's all because of Schneidemühl, thought the officers and cursed the town roundly.

In the morning the First Battalion set off from the Hindenburgplatz—the central square of the town; the soldiers began singing intermittently. The German children stared with wide eyes out of the windows and from under the gates.

Veselchakov rode on horseback in front of the battalion. The company commanders, also on horseback, followed at the head of their rather sparse companies. Behind the infantry came the battalion mortars, brightly polished and looking quite peaceful. The machine guns—even on gun carriages, with their barrels pointing backwards—looked threatening. Then the wagon-train went past, and

behind everybody rode Glasha, her rosy face beaming and smiling affably at the whole world.

The soldiers, who had counted on a long rest, were nevertheless glad at the unexpected move. They too, on hearing something about the route, shook their heads bitterly: oh, not to Berlin! They looked closely at the villages and small towns, at the tiled roofs and at the fences and palings on which white flags fluttered in the strong wind.

As the soldiers marched along the road they carried on unhurried conversations, gravely sharing their impressions of Germany.

Sergeant-Major Godunov, a former kolkhoz brigade leader, a hereditary tiller of the soil, was interested, of course, mainly in agriculture. He let the grey German soil run through his fingers, cast an experienced eye over the small peasant plots and the broad fields of the landowners and, when they camped in the villages, examined the yards and the outbuildings in detail.

"They led different lives," he said, scratching the back of his huge cropped head. "The landowner here had two thousand hectares of land, while the rest who lived in the village had five hundred all put together. What a hell of a mess!"—he snorted contemptuously and marched on silently for a while; and they all realized that he was thinking of his own native kolkhoz Lenin's Way in the distant Altai, a kolkhoz about which Godunov had told the soldiers many times already. "They ought to come and learn from us," he said proudly, then suddenly remembering his present duties, shouted in a thunderous voice: "Don't straggle! . . . Smarten up! . . . Pichugin, don't lag behind! . . ."

True to his deeply-rooted habit of generalizing events, the Party organizer Slivenko remarked:

"And they were always complaining: there's not enough land. . . . Even went to war with us to grab

some! . . . But they would have done better to fight for land with their own gentry: it would have worked out cheaper and there would have been some sense in it!"

Swaying on the back of his huge horse and listening with half an ear to the soldiers' talk, Chokhov was thinking about himself.

Major Migayev had just ridden up to tell him that he, Chokhov, had been recommended for the Order of the Red Banner, for the Schneidemühl fighting. The Captain had been the first to break through with his company into the town and had seized the main building of the Albatros factory and Querstrasse.

A warm wave of feeling rose in Chokhov's proud heart, but he said nothing. Migayev asked, screwing up his eyes:

"What did you say?"

"Nothing," answered Chokhov.

Young whippersnapper! thought Migayev. He very much wanted Chokhov to say something. His heart ached for the Captain, the more so because from Chokhov's service record he already knew his biography.

But Chokhov looked at Migayev pretty sullenly and held his tongue.

"All right, catch up the company," said Migayev impatiently.

"Yes," answered Chokhov and touched the bridle.

However, when he had reached his own men he thought with pleasure about that glorious Order with the red-and-white ribbon, which had been recently introduced. But he immediately checked himself: Don't get soft!

And it was only thanks to Major Lubentsov, he thought, trying to subdue his feelings, that we took Querstrasse so quickly. He got the Germans out with those grenades. . . .

He remembered Lubentsov with deep sympathy. Was he badly wounded? Would he return to the division?

The soldiers looked at Chokhov with respect. Even Slivenko, who had at first regarded him with misgivings, now decided that the new commander was a good chap, although he had his queer points. A little bit backward, politically, thought Slivenko. In particular Slivenko disapproved of the fact that Chokhov still kept his famous carriage. True, the carriage followed separately, somewhere in the rear of the regiments, out of the way of the higher-ups.

During the fighting for Schneidemühl the Captain had impressed his soldiers with his unusual coolheadedness. It was as if he had some charm against bullets and his whole manner was that of someone who in his childhood had indeed been smeared with a magic paste, as he told them once in camp. Only his heel, he explained, looking rather sombrely at his soldiers, his heel, by which his mother had been holding him at that time, had remained unsmeared and that was his only vulnerable spot.

"Now you are talking about someone else," laughed Semiglav. "That was Achilles' heel."

"Then don't ask," said Chokhov.

A strong north wind was blowing, and the soldiers bent their heads as they marched. Their greatcoats and capes fluttered, the tarpaulins covering the wagons flapped loudly. Wet snow fell on the barrels of the mortars. The wind roared in the trees at the roadside, swept low over the fields and tore the white rags from balconies and windows.

On the fourth day of the march the company stopped at a big estate. Behind a thickly white-washed stone wall, over which hung the bare branches of huge trees, stood an old house with an attic. Its walls were overgrown with ivy, curling in beautiful patterns, like the designs on winter windows.

When he had quartered his soldiers Sergeant-Major Godunov went, as usual, to look over the outbuildings.

Well, the stables and the cattle yards were "first class," no worse than in his native Altai kolkhoz. Here though, all this wealth belonged to one man, and at this Godunov again snorted contemptuously.

To the Party organizer he said:

"They used to talk of German culture. . . . But do they call that culture, when one man has so much and the others haven't a penny to bless themselves with."

In the yard, among the plastered outbuildings stood a Mercedes-Benz car; to its radiator ordinary wooden shafts had been fixed for harnessing a pair of horses. Godunov called over all the soldiers to admire this arrangement.

The soldiers laughed loudly, very pleased that petrol was running out in Germany and that even landowners were driving on "horse petrol."

Next to this German carriage of the time of Hitler, Godunov parked Chokhov's ancient carriage of the time of Kaiser Wilhelm and, after giving instructions about supper, went off to the neighbouring peasants' yards, where he was met by the ingratiating smiles of scared Germans. Since the only words Godunov knew in German were "halt" and "kaput," he did not start talking to them but simply looked over a few dung-strewn peasants' yards, like a tourist. They were small and desolate. And, quite satisfied by his inspection, he shook his head and thundered:

"Everything's clear!"

The pleased smile vanished from the Sergeant-Major's face when, on returning to the estate, he discovered that one of his soldiers—Pichugin—was absent. He discovered that Pichugin had dropped behind during a big midday halt in the small town of Schöneberg. The Sergeant-Major became worried. He had to report the absence of one of his soldiers to the Captain.

"Find him!" said Chokhov.

Godunov detailed Semiglav to go to Schöneberg

Late in the evening, when everybody had gone to sleep, Semiglav at last returned with Pichugin.

"Where have you been?" asked the Sergeant-Major who had acquired Chokhov's clear and brief manner of speaking.

Pichugin, an elderly, puny man from Kaluga Region, stood in front of the Sergeant-Major, blinking his little blue eyes.

"Dozed off, Comrade Sergeant-Major," he said. "And when I woke up I didn't know where to go. I was waiting in case you might send someone for me."

Pichugin repeated the same thing to the Captain, when he came up, adding:

"Thank 'ee for sending someone for me! . . ."

He spoke humbly, but cunningly. He was obviously not telling the truth.

"No trouble at all," said Chokhov. "Next time we'll send a bullet for you."

And he went away, leaving Pichugin to meditate upon this threat.

Pichugin scratched his thin, reddish hair and whispered in fright to Semiglav:

"And what do you think? He'll kill me! He's that sort! . . ."

All was quiet in the estate. Pichugin strolled about the yard, then went back to the house, and began peering into the faces of the sleeping soldiers. They were all asleep. But in the big room cluttered with bookcases he saw Slivenko lying on a big divan and smoking a huge twist of makhorka, whose glow in the shadowy darkness lit up the thoughtful face of the Senior Sergeant.

Pichugin walked up to the Party organizer on tiptoe, stood silently for a minute and finally said:

"Have a look at what I've got."

He ran out and came back immediately with his pack.

Unfastening the straps he grinned cunningly, like a conspirator.

"Take a look, Fyodor Andreich," he said in a thin, quavering voice. "Take a look in the old knapsack and see what I've got."

In the pack lay some rolls of box-calf leather.

"And what do you want them for?" asked Slivenko indifferently, thinking of his own affairs.

"To a soldier they ain't no use, you're right about that, Fyodor Andreich, but for a civilian peasant they are just the thing. It's just the end of the war now. All right! They are worth a good three thousand rubles in Kaluga. The German grabbed everything, snaffled everything, didn't he? There's people going about in those bast shoes like before the revolution. Well, there you are!"

Slivenko waved his hand:

"Drop it, will you! . . . You can't make shoes for everybody out of two bits of leather."

"Why everybody?" said Pichugin, hurt. "What's everybody got to do with me? I've got enough of my own! There's six in my family, Fyodor Andreich."

"Family?" Slivenko looked at Pichugin but said nothing.

But Pichugin couldn't stop.

"And it's right. It's a sort of indemnity from the Germans. That's what I says, if you want to know."

Slivenko laughed and turned away. Perhaps he went to sleep. In any case he made no reply to Pichugin's further attempts to continue the conversation.

Pichugin walked away and lay down on his bed in the next room, but was unable to sleep.

At the sight of the empty flats and shops and of so much unguarded property abandoned by fleeing Germans, he burned with desire to acquire it. He was ready to weep when he remembered his ruined log cabin. He wanted to take back everything he saw: boards, bricks, chairs,

crockery, horses and cows. He dreamed of a big cart about the size of an omnibus. Ah, if only they would give each soldier a cart and a pair of horses! He turned from side to side, and the cart loaded to the top, rose before his eyes. There it was, rolling into his native village and being met with the joyful cries of the children.

Of course, he justified himself mentally to Slivenko, for whom he had great respect, it would be a good thing to make shoes for everybody! . . . But I'm a small man! . . . Not a Party organizer! . . .

On the walls of the room hung big pictures in gilded frames. The dim outlines of the strange faces looked down on Pichugin.

The sentry at the gates paced steadily to and fro. Downstairs an old woman was shuffling about. Except for the sentry, only two people were not sleeping in the whole place; Pichugin and the old mistress of the house.

The mistress was in the grip of perpetual, almost insane fear. Either she had not had time or she had not wanted to flee together with her son. Perhaps it had occurred to her that no one would touch an old woman.

Now, sitting in the little servants' room and shuddering at every sound, this heiress of high-born Prussian gentry expected death at any minute, at the hands of a Bolshevik with a long beard. In spite of the fact that complete stillness reigned all round, that the tapestry on the walls had not changed its design and the bronze heads of the sphinxes on the arms of the chairs gazed with the same expression of acquiescent calm, the old woman felt menaced by some new, incomprehensible, hostile and terrible world, in which there could be no place for her or anything to which she was accustomed.

She took the arrival of the Russians not at all as the arrival of an army of conquerors but just as the

end of the world—that world in which she had lived all her life.

No one came to ask for her, and this filled the old woman with even more fear.

Only at dawn was the door of the room flung wide open and on the threshold appeared a big Russian woman in military uniform. The fact that it was a woman that appeared, and not the expected Bolshevik with the beard, terrified the old woman to swooning point. She looked into the big, light eyes of the woman "commissar" and whispered a prayer with lifeless lips.

Glasha, who had arrived together with the battalion barber, was too busy to go into the cause of this old woman's fright. She ordered the baths to be heated for the soldiers. But there turned out to be no baths in the village: the Germans usually washed in basins and tubs. Glasha groaned with amazement. She ordered the water to be heated. The old woman, thinking that only a miracle had saved her from death, ran to obey.

IV

Captain Chokhov came downstairs.

Glasha told him that the regiment would stay here for some time, as the division was waiting for reinforcements.

A cheery bustle reigned in the yard: hair was being cut and soap and clean underwear handed out. Glasha gave the strictest orders to the soldiers that in future they were to sleep only in their underwear.

"Enough of this," said Glasha angrily, "you've had your sleeping in dugouts and trenches! It's about time you got used to living decently again!"

The old mistress, wearing a long black dress with frills, fussed about a large kitchen which stood by itself in the yard. She was walking round a huge tiled stove,

where the water was being heated in tubs. With her were two maids—young German women with their hair done up high, who were shooting glances out of the corners of their eyes at the soldiers.

When Chokhov saw that the company was now under Glasha's command, he retreated to his own quarters upstairs, not wishing to submit to a woman's authority even in questions of hygiene.

He glanced in passing at the big pictures in the gilded frames, then sat down at the window. It suddenly occurred to him that this ancient old woman in the black dress was probably a landowner. He opened his eyes wide at this.

A real live landowner! That was strange! Could this old woman in black really be the owner of all the property surrounding the estate, all this land, all these woods and meadows?

Chokhov now looked with quite a special interest at the wood at the edge of the grey, snow-scattered fields. It was very strange that this ordinary young aspen grove, just a wood like any other, belonged to one person, and the person was the old woman.

He went down into the yard again. Glasha had driven off to the Third Company. The soldiers were already bathing. He could hear their laughter and the splash of the water in the big tubs. The barber was cutting the soldiers' hair on the verandah. He had installed a big mirror from the drawing room, so that it would be like a real barber-shop. The maids were carrying tub after tub of hot and cold water into the house.

The landowner in her long, black dress still stood at the stove. Her yellow, puffy face was damp with steam.

Hell, she was the most ordinary old woman! A nasty old thing—that's all!

At that moment Chokhov was buttonholed by a tall old man with long, thin legs in woollen stockings,

covering his trousers to the knees, and wearing a green hat on which waved a funny tuft of greenish feathers. He turned out to be the estate manager.

He bowed to Chokhov, asking almost every minute:

"Darf ich, Herr Oberst?"*

Oberst—that's colonel—thought Chokhov, he's fawning, the old groveller!...

Chokhov kept on looking at the old woman. Yes, she was just a nasty old thing. And how could great healthy Germans put up with orders from this fat, hunchbacked *Baba Yaga*.** But the Germans had put up with Hitler too....

Perhaps she ought to be liquidated as a class, thought Chokhov. He decided to find out what the Party organizer thought on this subject. Slivenko had already washed and come out into the yard. Chokhov invited him to sit down beside him on the bench and, after a minute's silence, said vaguely:

"You see, this woman landowner...."

"Yes," answered Slivenko, glancing indifferently at the figure of the old woman, outlined in the kitchen doorway.

Then he noticed the look of concentration in the Captain's face and understood: although Chokhov was a Captain he was, after all, just a boy—this was the first landowner he had seen in his life!

Slivenko burst out laughing:

"So what? Wouldn't be a bad idea to send her to her Russian relatives?"

"Yes," said Chokhov and rose from the bench, perhaps to give the necessary orders.

Slivenko, however, remained seated.

* Allow me, Colonel?

** A witch in Russian folklore.

"It's not worth it," he said, as if he were feeling lazy, and repeated, more insistently: "It's not worth it."

"And the land to go to the peasants," said Chokhov half questioningly.

"All in good time," said Slivenko and added slyly in Ukrainian: "It's not for a company to decide such matters, Comrade Captain."

This remark stung Chokhov, again reminding him of the fact that he was only a company commander. And, although at heart he agreed with the Party organizer that social transformations were not the concern of a rifle company commander, he frowned.

Noticing the sparks of anger in the Captain's eyes, Slivenko stood up and said warningly:

"I'll ask the Political Department, let them decide. . . ."

Chokhov understood Slivenko's hint very well. He sat down again on the bench.

The Sergeant-Major came up to them, washed clean and gleaming all over. When he discovered that this old woman in black was the local landowner, he was even more surprised than Chokhov. To tell the truth, he also agreed with the Captain that urgent measures should be taken in this case.

"O-oh, the witch!" thundered the Sergeant-Major, his powerful voice echoing over the whole yard, so that the German women looked round in fright.

"She ought to be dispossessed."

But the Party organizer managed to make him see reason too. The Sergeant yielded and said to the Captain:

"Well, let her give us some breakfast, at any rate!"

"That she can do," said Chokhov and added with a sidelong glance at Slivenko: "she has exploited other people enough."

Just then Semiglav shouted from the window that the Captain had been summoned to Battalion Headquarters. A horse was saddled, and Chokhov set off for the next

village, while Godunov went to talk to the mistress about breakfast.

Breakfast over, the soldiers began singing. The windows were wide open and the song rang out through the whole village. They sang sad and exalted songs, full of yearning for their native land.

As the soldiers sang the words they had known since childhood, they soon began to feel the contrast between the spirit of the song and the spirit of the place they were in. In an indefinable way, they began to listen to the familiar melody as if they were apart from it, as if from the point of view of the Germans, who sat silently in their houses and listened to the sweeping rhythm of the Russian song. And since the soldiers were hearing their own song, from the side, as it were, they found in it an entirely new charm and strength they had not noticed before.

The bells are jingling . . .

began Semiglav, wondering anew at these words and delighting in them. Lord, what fine words! he thought.

Sergeant-Major Godunov, foregoing his Sergeant-Major's dignity, joined in with a deep bass. He listened, deeply moved by the lilt of the song, remembering his native kolkhoz, the boundless cornfields and dense forests of the Altai, and felt proud that he was here and that they were listening to him.

At the window a sad Pichugin supported the rest with his soft small tenor.

I remembered those nights gone by,—

sang Gogoberidze in an oriental manner, rather harshly and drawing out his notes, with unexpected soft passages.

Though the songs were purely Russian, they reminded him of lovely Georgia, his native Kakhetia and the green grapevines on the banks of the Alazan. Flashing the

bluish whites of his burning eyes malevolently, he raised his voice so that those sitting in the houses should hear better:

*I remembered those nights gone by,
My native fields and forests dear,
And to eyes that were long since dry
Came, like a star, a tear.*

Slivenko felt sad and went out unnoticed into the yard. The sentry was standing at the gates listening enviously to the singers.

Slivenko walked out to the road. The main road passed by here, empty at this early hour, and he leaned against the stone wall, smoking a twist of makhorka.

Not far off some people had assembled by the stone wall. They stood listening to the Russians' song and talked amongst themselves. Noticing them, Slivenko walked nearer and asked:

"What do you want?"

A young man, in an old jersey and blue flannel cap with the earflaps hanging down, stepped out of the group and said with a timid joy—he said it almost in Russian but with a strange un-Russian accent:

"I am a Czech. Czech!"

Slivenko put out his hand and, flattered by this, the Czech shook it so hard that Slivenko smiled. And when Slivenko smiled, everybody could see right into his kind soul. The people surrounded the Russian soldier, shook his hand and clapped him warmly on the shoulder.

From the Czech's explanations Slivenko realized that these people, labourers belonging to the landowner—Baroness von Borkau—had come to thank the Russians for their liberation. Among them were Dutchmen, Frenchmen, Belgians, one Dane and himself—"Czech, Czech!"

He also found out that since yesterday the baroness had begun to feed them well. And that today there were

eggs for breakfast, the first time for all the years they had spent here. But it needed the presence of the whole Russian army on German soil to get the Baroness von Borkau to go to the expense of eggs for labourers.

"Only the Russian army and no other army in the world!" the Czech translated a delighted remark from one of the Frenchmen.

"Are there any Russian labourers here?" asked Slivenko.

The Czech said joyfully:

"No! No Russians."

The lively Czech, blue with cold but cheerful, spoke gaily about everything, even about his spell in a German concentration camp a year ago. He was filled with a joy that dimmed even the saddest memories.

They told Slivenko that Russian labourers had been here but had left about ten days ago, as soon as the first Russian tanks appeared in these parts. But not all the Russian labourers had left. One girl had not lived to see the arrival of her own people. She had died at the end of last year and they had buried her not far from here.

"The Russian slečna*... wept and wept... and died," that was how the Czech told about this girl.

There was a big hush. Everyone was waiting to hear what Slivenko would say. He was saddened and said gruffly:

"Come in."

They entered the yard in a cheerful crowd. But when they saw the old woman standing at the window in her black dress, the labourers grew timid and slowed their pace, but Slivenko, noticing this, said encouragingly:

"Come on, don't be afraid."

He looked straight at the old woman with such hate-filled eyes that she trembled and disappeared.

* Girl (Czech).

The soldiers surrounded the freed labourers and began talking animatedly with them, mostly with their eyes and hands. Sergeant-Major Godunov drew himself up to his full gigantic height and shouted an order to the two German maids to feed the labourers.

"Everything they ask for," he said, "give it to them! Understand?"

But that did not seem enough to him. He ordered the old woman to serve at the table as well. With slow, short steps she walked from the kitchen to the table and back again, carrying the plates in her trembling, fat hands.

Slivenko went with the Czech to the back of the yard. Here he stood silently for a while and then asked:

"And who was she? . . . That Russian girl? . . ."

The Czech explained that the girl had worked here as a *Schweinmädchen* (swineherd) and was born in the Ukraine.

"From the Ukraine?" asked Slivenko again and began to roll a makhorka cigarette.

"Yes," answered the Czech.

Slivenko sat down on the bench, invited the Czech to sit down beside him and said:

"Want a smoke?"

Tobacco! The labourers had had no tobacco at all and that, perhaps, had been worse than hunger. Slivenko poured into the Czech's palm half the contents of his big silk pouch.

Yes, the girl was from the Ukraine—dark skinned and black haired with long plaits. Just over there on the bench, near the pigsty, she would sit in the evenings and cry, until the baroness or the manager, Herr Vogt, noticed her. The baroness would clap her hands and say indignantly: "Ach, mein Gott, the Russian is again sitting about without work!" "And why do they cry?"—the manager would say in surprise.

"With long plaits?" asked Slivenko.

"Yes," said the Czech.

She had come here with some others in '42. They all looked very bad.

"I see," said Slivenko and, at last, asked hoarsely: "What was her name?"

Her name was not Galya, but Maria.

The Czech went away to the table, but Slivenko remained sitting on that very bench by the pigsty, holding his head sadly in his hands. The girl was not his Galya, but was this the only estate in Germany? The only Russian grave?

The soldiers were getting noisy.

The young man had surrounded a slender young Dutch girl with dazzling golden hair, almost red, falling down to her shoulders.

She was very beautiful. Her bright blue eyes under long dark eyelashes threw coquettish glances at the soldiers, who were melting with pleasure. Unfortunately the Dutch girl introduced her husband, a quiet, colourless Dutchman, and this cooled down Gogoberidze, who had been greatly affected.

"Well?" laughed Pichugin, noticing Gogoberidze's disappointed look. "Married wench, eh? But don't you miss your chance all the same. . . ."

"Well, no," answered Gogoberidze, disheartened. "A Dutchman, he's an ally, you understand! . . ."

Pichugin surveyed the women boldly, particularly one French woman already past her prime—"just the right age,"—and talked to them without stopping, relentlessly declining German words in the Russian manner:

"Now you, frauam, will be feeling besser."

The women were delighted. They caught the envious glances of the German women and, laughing maliciously, watched the Baroness von Borkau slowly dragging her feet from kitchen to table and from table to kitchen. How they regretted not knowing a word of Russian!

But the beautiful golden-haired Margarete knew a song, which she had learnt from her girl friends here on the estate. And she sang it in a gentle voice, blithely daring her bold blue eyes at the soldiers, not feeling in the least bit shy. She pronounced the Russian words with an impossible accent:

*Vi were sailing on zebot
mig olten boy!*

This should have been: "We were sailing on a boat, my golden boy!" The soldiers roared with laughter.

V

When Chokhov arrived at Battalion Headquarters he learned that he had been summoned to a meeting—one of the usual improvised meetings about the order of march and such shortcomings as needed attention.

Everybody noticed how gloomy the Battalion Commander looked. Although he said the usual things—about the men's equipment, about the cleaning and oiling of weapons, etc.—he seemed to be thinking at the same time about something else; he kept on stopping and hesitating and his slight stutter—the result of shell-shock in '41—was today especially noticeable.

After the meeting Glasha came in. She invited the company commanders to have lunch and, making an effort to smile, said:

"It's the last time we'll be eating together, my dears...."

Indeed, that morning an order had been received putting Glasha at the disposal of the divisional medical officer "for further duty."

This order came as a complete surprise to Veselchakov and Glasha. Major Garin who had carried out the

investigation had assured them many times that everything was all right and that no one was going to separate them.

And suddenly, this order.

Veselchakov was shy and neither liked nor knew how to talk to his superiors about his personal affairs. Nevertheless, at Glasha's insistent request he rang up the Second-in-Command of the regiment. But both the Second-in-Command and the Chief of Staff, Major Migayev, answered rather abruptly that once an order had been given there was no more to be said.

Then Glasha rang up Major Garin at Divisional Headquarters. He was confused and said that he could do nothing, as the order had come from the corps. The corps! For Veselchakov and Glasha the corps was an unscalable peak, something almost above the clouds. They were horrified that their "affair," their simple names, had even been discussed at the corps.

They sat down at the table, but today there wasn't the same liveliness which usually reigned at the table of the hospitable Glasha. The conversation was quiet and about outside matters.

Veselchakov was silent, only from time to time throwing a glance at Glasha and saying irrelevantly:

"Well, never mind, never mind. . . ."

A cart was provided, and the Battalion Commander's orderly put Glasha's luggage into it. Glasha kissed the company commanders, the Battalion Commander's assistant, the Adjutant, the orderly and all the soldiers of the Battalion Headquarters. She kissed them on both cheeks, three times, according to the Russian custom, then sat down in the cart.

The officers stood on the steps, looking on silently. The driver twitched the reins, Veselchakov walked along beside the cart.

Glasha said:

"The shoe brush and polish are in the knapsack, in the left pocket. Seryozha knows. The comb is in your jacket, mind you keep it there, and always put it back in its place. You have got about a dozen handkerchiefs; use a new one every other day. Your old boots are being repaired, they will be ready today, collect them—put them on, and hand in the ones you have on to be repaired, the right heel is worn right down. As soon as the new medical assistant arrives, give him the sulphidine and alcohol—they are hidden in the suitcase."

When the cart had turned off behind the hill and the village was out of sight, the driver stopped the horse, Glasha climbed down, burst into tears and embraced Veselchakov.

They still could not bring themselves to part, and walked on for some time together behind the cart, in which the driver sat with his back tactfully turned, staring fixedly at the horse's tail.

Meanwhile Chokhov started back. The horse trotted slowly along the wet asphalt. Over the fields covered with patches of snow the wind was whirling fiercely. The road was fairly deserted. Occasionally cars went by. One of them drew up, and three men jumped out of the back on to the road. The car drove off but the men stood where they were, smoking, and then walked unhurriedly towards Chokhov.

"Captain!" shouted one of them.

Chokhov reined in his horse. Before him, smiling, stood the familiar figure of a scout, Captain Meshchersky: tall, erect, very cordial and, as always, exceedingly polite.

"Very glad to see you," said Meshchersky. "Are you stationed round here?"

"Yes, in the next village," Chokhov pointed in the direction of the estate; then he asked: "Has the division stopped for long?"

"No one knows," said Meshchersky. "We are just on our way to the Medical Battalion. Our Major of the Guards is there." As if he had just remembered something, Meshchersky exclaimed: "Comrade Captain! It was you who rescued him! Come along with us, he will be very glad. He was asking about you the other day."

Chokhov said stiffly:

"I didn't rescue him. Perhaps it was he who rescued me. He struck at the Germans from the rear."

"Well, that's fine!" said Meshchersky. "Oh, forgive me! I quite forgot to introduce you. . . Oganessian, our interpreter . . . Sergeant-Major Voronin . . . Captain Chokhov..."

Chokhov turned his horse and rode along beside the scouts. Soon they turned off on to a side road. The red tiles of village roofs and the inevitable church tower could be seen in the distance. Then the white spots of hospital tents appeared with the smoke of iron stoves curling above them.

At the sight of the tents a feeling of deep respect welled up in Chokhov, as it would in any soldier who had been wounded. The Medical Battalion always leaves the warmest memories with people. A wounded man is brought here from the very heat of battle, immediately placed on a clean sheet, his clothes are changed for clean linen, he is given a glass of vodka, gentle hands bandage him, wipe away the clotted blood with soft cotton wool, cool his burning forehead with water. The contrast with what one has just experienced in battle is so striking and the feeling of relief so great, that afterwards one feels deep gratitude at the mere sight of a hospital tent.

Chokhov hastened to dismount and led his horse by the bridle. Everywhere women's figures in white gowns were darting about. The nurses smiled welcomingly as they ran past the scouts and told them in passing:

"The Major has been expecting you since morning!"

"The Major's bandages were changed this morning!"

Meshchersky halted beside one of the tents.

"The Major of the Guards is in here," he said, addressing Chokhov.

Chokhov tethered his horse to the nearest fence and followed the scouts into the tent. The young nurse with red cheeks who met them gave them medical gowns and led them behind the canvas screen.

Lubentsov was sitting up in bed. He had grown thinner and looked serious.

Recognizing Chokhov, he said:

"Hullo! Here's someone I did not expect to see."

They all sat down on the chairs round the bed. Meshchersky went out to the nurse behind the screen and, very properly, asked in a whisper about the Guards Major's health. Meshchersky's mother acted like that when somebody was ill at home and the doctor came. Unconsciously copying his mother, Meshchersky asked just as quietly and meticulously about the Major's wound, going into the minutest details.

Oganesyan gave Lubentsov the latest numbers of *Pravda* and *Red Star*. After looking round cautiously and even glancing through the flap to see if there were any doctors in the vicinity, Voronin pushed a bottle of wine under Lubentsov's pillow.

"Now, stop it!" protested Lubentsov. "What are you hiding it for? We'll drink it up now."

The Major was lying in the tent alone. There were no other wounded. Lubentsov had been left to recover in the Medical Battalion, although this was not usually allowed. When the Divisional Commander discovered that the wound was a light one, he had not wanted to part with his scout: after all, when he came out of the hospital he might find himself in another division, and the General valued him highly.

When Meshchersky returned with the nurse, Voronin whispered something in her ear. She shook her head, but

immediately went out. When she came back she, too, was looking round in case any doctors were watching, for she had brought a few glasses.

They all drank and sat in silence, resting soul and body, as always happens with men from the front line when they find themselves out of action for a short time.

The firewood crackled. The nurse crouched before the stove, throwing dry pine logs into the fire from time to time. It was quiet, cozy and warm.

Suddenly the tarpaulin shook and into the tent ran a girl in a greatcoat without shoulder tabs. She was pale, large-eyed, with black glossy hair, cut like a boy's.

"The Germans are concentrating in the region of Madü-See, Stargard," she blurted out hastily. Then, smiling with her lips alone, she shook everybody's hand and to the stranger, Chokhov, introduced herself shortly: Vika.

Chokhov realized that this was the Divisional Commander's daughter. It was the first time he had seen her.

Vika had just been with her father and had brought Lubentsov news, which she tried to remember very accurately. She handed the Major a sheet of paper bearing the Supreme Commander-in-Chief's order, commending the troops for the capture of Schneidemühl.

"Daddy is very glad," she said. "Stalin himself wrote that Schneidemühl was a powerful strongpoint of the German defences in the eastern part of Pomerania. . . . And the Army Commander was saying: a little hole! . . ."

Lubentsov laughed. Lowering her voice, Vika asked:

"And do you know who sent you his greetings?" Glancing round victoriously at those present, she pronounced solemnly: "Lieutenant-General Sizokrylov! He sent them personally. To you and me. . . ."

She added sadly: "His son has been killed."

Vika fell silent and sat down beside the nurse by the stove. Lubentsov explained:

"I drove with the member of the Military Council to the tank division. He was making the trip and I went with him as a kind of guide. . . ."

He turned to Chokhov: "And you must remember it. . . . We overtook that carriage of yours." The Guards Major frowned and asked hesitatingly: "And the carriage, is it with you or have you left it behind by now?"

Chokhov lowered his eyes and answered evasively:

"I'm riding a horse."

"And right you are," said Lubentsov. "Carriages don't bring anybody any good." He smiled wryly.

The scouts couldn't help noticing that the Major was very thoughtful today, even gloomy. They put it down to the death of Chibiryov. But there was another reason too. Yesterday, during the inspection, Lubentsov had talked to leading surgeon Captain Myshkin. Myshkin had happened to mention a surgeon of another Medical Battalion, Koltsova, as being a very talented and promising young doctor. He spoke of a complicated abdominal operation which she had performed.

Although Lubentsov did not ask any questions but just kept the conversation going, Myshkin said in passing that Koltsova was having an affair with one of the corps chiefs.

"With whom?" asked Lubentsov, blushing deeply.

"With Krasikov."

For some reason the fact that it was Krasikov particularly stung Lubentsov. He had seen the Colonel several times. Krasikov was an elderly, very abrupt and self-opinionated officer, although both energetic and brave. The Major immediately felt he had always disliked Krasikov, though this was not so at all.

Trying not to think about it, Lubentsov turned to Meshchersky:

"Sasha, read us something. I'm in a strange mood, just right for listening to some poetry."

Meshchersky was embarrassed.

"But Comrade Major of the Guards!" he said. "It's already time for us to go. . . ." He was getting up from his chair, but Lubentsov stopped him.

Chokhov was utterly surprised. So he writes poetry! he thought, not without respect. Oganesyán, who had been sulking in the corner, spoke up for the first time, joining in Lubentsov's request. And Vika also took a hand, saying:

"Please read, we all ask you."

"I'll read you 'Tyorkin,' "* said Meshchersky. "Some chapters have been published in the *Red Army Man*."

That pleased everyone. Tyorkin, that wise and brave soldier, a jack-of-all-trades, was a favourite among the men and the mere mention of his name was enough to summon to the face of almost any soldier a merry, cunning and even proud smile, as if he felt that he himself had been the poet's model for Vasili Tyorkin.

Meshchersky began to read and soon they all fell under the spell of the inimitable conversational tone of those warm and simple lines.

*There's a law, a man's his time to do,
Service is labour, a soldier labours too.
There's last post—he's fast asleep.
There's reveille—he's up and on his feet.
There's war—the soldier has to fight.
If there's a scrap, he'll scrap all right.
There's a signal: forward! . . .—On ahead.
There's an order: die! He's dead.*

.
*Our hero's alive and well just now,
But he by no means wears a charm
'Gainst a damn fool splinter
Or a bullet bearing harm,*

* *Vasili Tyorkin*—a poem by A. Tvardovsky.

*Which, perhaps, like any other
Random bullet flying blind,
Finds a mark—he's had it, brother.
The wind is fierce and biting,
Life is just a leaf that's trembling,
Every day and every hour the bullets hum.
Who can say, it's not for saying,
There's no telling what's to come.*

Voronin sighed loudly and asked for more. Meshchersky read some poems popular among the soldiers—Simonov's "Wait for Me," and others. Towards the end Lubentsov said:

"Read something of your own, Sasha. You know, that one about the scouts."

Meshchersky's face at once grew serious. After thinking a moment, he began in a quiet voice, not at all as loud and enthusiastic as before:

*In silence austere and solemn
They left by the paths and highways
Of their suffering native land,
And letters to them in accents grieved
Wrote a mother's loving hand,
But those letters were never received.
The scouts are gone and will ne'er return,
O'er them the bowing fir trees mourn,
O'er them spring waters weeping are,
O'er them, dear ones, who speak no more,
In the misty sky before the dawn
Burns, still bright, a scarlet star.*

They liked the poem.

"Like in a book," said Voronin.

Lubentsov, looking lovingly at Meshchersky, who was embarrassed by the praise he had received, felt afraid for him, I won't send the lad anywhere else, decided

Lubentsov, not now. . . . If I am killed, it would not matter so much. But he's a poet. He will be famous, perhaps, after the war, he may write something fine.

"You busy people," said Lubentsov, "you've no time for thinking. . . . But I lie here on this bed, without anything to do. I keep on thinking and thinking, day after day. Even we ourselves don't yet realize what we have done and to what strength we have matured. You know, I envy Meshchersky: he writes poetry! . . . But if you just say good words to people without any rhyme, they get offended or start laughing. And you want to embrace everybody, but it's somehow awkward. I would embrace the little nurse here only I'm afraid she'll think I have something else in mind."

At these words the nurse blushed scarlet and flew out of the tent like a bullet.

"It looks as if she wouldn't be against a bit of embracing," laughed Sergeant-Major Voronin.

Vika gave a forced smile at this joke, which in her opinion was out of place. She had been listening to Lubentsov with great attention.

Lubentsov who was not accustomed to pouring out his heart, grew embarrassed and changed the subject to army matters. He asked Oganessian whether the German guide on the use of faustpatrones had been preserved. The retreating Germans were abandoning huge quantities of these peculiar anti-tank shells, but not all our soldiers knew how to use them.

"The manual," said the Major, "should be translated into Russian, duplicated in our division printshop and distributed among the soldiers. . . . Let them learn it, it will come in handy."

Oganessian and Meshchersky promised to report Lubentsov's suggestion to the Divisional Commander.

For some reason Chokhov did not feel like leaving. The atmosphere around the Major was full of a spe-

cial kind of peace, kindheartedness and mutual friendliness.

However, it was time to go.

"Where is your battalion stationed?" asked Lubentsov.

"Not far away," said Chokhov, "we've stopped at a landowner's place. A rich old witch! She's got pictures hanging everywhere."

What suddenly happened to the hitherto silent interpreter! He jumped up, grabbed Chokhov by the hand and exclaimed:

"Pictures? What pictures?"

To this puzzling question Chokhov had no answer.

"What pictures!" said Chokhov. "I don't know what pictures. All kinds."

"Where are they? I'll come and see you today."

They all laughed at the art critic's excitement.

Chokhov said:

"Come then. We are stationed in the next village. You can see it from here. There's the church steeple."

Chokhov went out of the tent, untethered his horse, jumped into the saddle and galloped off to his own company.

VI

As he approached the estate Chokhov heard the sound of soldiers' laughter and women's gay voices.

He frowned, lashed his horse, trotted past the frightened sentry and stopped abruptly in the middle of the yard.

Gogoberidze, the company's duty soldier, jumped away from the beautiful Dutch girl as if he had been scalded and shouted at the top of his voice:

"Tenshun!"

The laughter died away instantly. Everybody stood up. The guests, a little frightened, also jumped up.

Without dismounting, Chokhov addressed the Sergeant-Major:

"What's the fun about?"

Godunov, unabashed, hastened to explain:

"These are not Germans, Comrade Captain. They are all Frenchmen and Dutch. . . . They were working here as labourers. They are all ours, that is, working folks, Comrade Captain. They've suffered at the hands of fascists."

"At ease!"

Chokhov leapt down from his horse and went into the house. In one of the rooms Slivenko and the old woman landowner were sitting opposite each other. Beside Slivenko's armchair stood a young man, unknown to Chokhov, in a worn jersey and a blue cap. Were it not for the colour of the old woman's face, sallow with fear, one might have thought this a friendly meeting.

On seeing the Captain, Slivenko stood up.

"I am having a political talk with the landowner," he said grinning. "It's quite interesting! I asked her how could she have used slave labour, it's not human. And she answers: 'Good heavens, what slave labour! People work because they have to live, to earn money, you know.' Then I ask, and this comrade translates, he's a Czech, understands everything that we and they say: 'How's that, if the people are forced to work and have been driven here from other countries?' And do you know what this old wretch answers me? 'They would have starved to death,' she says, 'the factories there have stopped working, there's a lot of destruction, very little sowing and ploughing. . . .' Then I ask: 'And why have the factories stopped working? Why is there destruction?' Why, because they did it all themselves, the swine!"

Slivenko broke off with a wave of his hand.

At that moment the door burst open and the foreign workers entered in a bunch. At their head was the beautiful Dutch girl, her blue eyes shining. She extended her

hand to Chokhov and said a few words, blushing and evidently excited.

The Czech translated: Margarete, in the name of all the foreigners and in the name of their families too, thanks the Captain and the valiant Russian Army.

Chokhov shook her small hand and did not know what to answer.

He felt as if here, in this big, darkish room cluttered with book cases, he was on show before the whole world. And that he ought to say something weighty, not poetry of course, but something like poetry. How could the young Dutch girl and these people from different countries standing behind her know that he was only a captain and, what was more, not too highly rated at Headquarters. In their eyes he was great and irreproachable, and behind him stood the whole army of the Soviets.

He said:

"That's what we came here for."

And he wanted to run away to his own room, but there was no way out. The foreigners hemmed the Captain in tightly.

The Czech introduced them to Chokhov one by one, and Chokhov was surprised that people with unusual, romantic names, which he had met only in novels, looked almost like Russians, like the most ordinary people. One Frenchman's name was even something like "d'Artagnan," but he was just a quiet, pale youth in worn-out trousers.

They asked if they could soon set off home and how it should be organized: were they to wait for the arrival of the Soviet authorities or should they just set out? Further, they wanted to know whether passes from the Soviet Command would be necessary, and if so they urgently requested them.

A Dutchman, Roos, asked Mr. Captain to say exactly when the war would finish. A French woman, Margot

Méliér, wanted to know if they might requisition means of transport from the Germans and also—was it possible to get in touch with Paris by radio or some other means, would monsieur le capitaine give an order to that effect.

With each new question Chokhov grew more and more confused. He did not know if he should explain that he was really only the commander of a rifle company. But, one way or the other, he was their lawful protector. They believed in his ability to help them and he could not, must not, destroy their faith. Perhaps he, himself, at this moment felt all-powerful.

His answer was: Wait, wait for instructions. Instructions would be issued in good time, when the Soviet Command considered it necessary.

He was very pleased with his answer.

Monsieur Gardonnet, a Frenchman from Strasbourg, thanked monsieur le capitaine in the name of all his comrades, and then went on to ask about the health of Marshal Stalin and requested that greetings should be sent to him from the local group of liberated labourers and from him, Monsieur Gardonnet, personally.

No, it didn't even enter Chokhov's head to smile at the thought that they considered him to be so close to Stalin. On the contrary, the Captain's heart was filled with a warmth he had never experienced before. He said:

"The Supreme Commander-in-Chief is in good health. He is certainly glad that his soldiers are already here in Germany. The greetings will be sent," he paused and then added, wishing to be exact: "if there is an opportunity."

It was like a press conference. Chokhov drew a deep breath. Margarete looked at him delightedly. The landowner sat as before in the armchair, not daring to stir.

Just then Slivenko whispered to Chokhov that the labourers were poorly dressed and the women had only wooden clogs to wear.

Chokhov looked severely at the old woman and said:

"Dress them and give them shoes."

The Czech translated willingly. The old woman got up hurriedly, took a huge bunch of keys from her pocket and minced towards the door.

The delighted women followed her to choose themselves clothes and shoes from her ladyship's wardrobe. Chokhov sent Sergeant-Major Godunov with them, so that these "enemies of the people," as Chokhov called them, should not try to palm off rotten stuff on the foreigners.

Gathering up heaps of dresses and shoes, the women ran off to their own rooms, laughing and chattering. They still had to make considerable alterations to bring them into line with the fashions of at least 1939.

Oh, how they chattered away! Yes, these Russians were real fellows, they knew what women needed to go home in after five such years of absence!

The men stayed behind to talk with the Captain, but at that moment a deafening hooting of vehicles was heard from the street. Soviet heavy artillery, camouflaged with pine branches, was slowly moving through the village. They all went out to look at the gigantic guns.

Chokhov was left alone. He walked slowly about the big drawing room, hung with stags' antlers, the vain-glorious trophies of his lordship's hunt. A little below hung pictures in gilded frames. Chokhov felt proud, not only of himself now, but of them all—the soldiers, Major Lubentsov, Captain Meshchersky, everybody. The feeling was new to Chokhov and he gave it his concentrated attention.

Through the window came the hooting of vehicles, the clang of metal, merry voices and shouts of greetings.

Suddenly the door opened and Margarete came into the room. She murmured a few words, pointing at her new, black shoes with high heels—apparently she was thanking the Captain.

They stood facing each other.

She was beautiful and knew it. He was also handsome but did not know it. She was just herself, smiling at him provokingly. He felt himself to be the representative of a great army and people, and was trying to be severe and inaccessible.

Pointing her little finger at her chin she said:

"Margarete . . . Sie?"*

He understood and replied:

"Vasili Maximovich."

She did not understand the long name and raised her eyebrows.

"Vasili," said he, deciding for the sake of brevity to renounce his patronymic.

"Vásil, Vásil," for some reason she began laughing, as if she were very glad.

For a minute they stood in silence, then they both felt uncomfortable; neither of them could understand why. Perhaps she wants to ask me about something?—thought Chokhov, trying not to look too closely at the girl. Perhaps the Captain is busy and I am detaining him by not saying anything?—thought Margarete.

She said something shyly and waited for an answer, but he made no reply simply because he had not understood anything. Then she dropped a curtsey and ran to the door. Chokhov opened his eyes wide with surprise for he had only read about curtseys in books.

Outside she stood still for a minute, then ran off to her girl friends to tell them what a dear and incomprehensible man this captain was and that his name was Vasil.

Margarete had been born in Zaandam, a small town, to the northwest of Amsterdam. The town lay right on the seashore, near an old dyke, and was full of seagulls and the salty smells of fish. At one time it had been called Saardam. In August 1697, it was visited by the Tsar and

* Margarete—and you?

Grand Duke of Moscow, Peter the Great. To this day there still stands a monument to Peter, and the house with the tiled roof in which the Russian Tsar lived for several days is still there, too. A sawmill in the neighbourhood of the town is called "De Grootvorst" (Grand Duke) in memory of Peter's visit.

When Margarete used to think of far-off Russia she saw an image of the big strange man, whose gigantic shadow had once passed through the quiet bystreets of her native Zaandam. Even the Germans' war with Russia had seemed to her a distant, half-fantastic event, bearing no direct relation to her or her fellow countrymen. Of course, the enslaved Dutch people had listened to the news of the Germans' defeat in Russia with joy: they hated the Germans just as their forefathers had hated the Spaniards in the time of William the Silent. But they saw no direct connection between these events and their own fate.

And suddenly these events had burst into their lives. The great eastern expanses turned out to be not quite so distant, not quite so much of another planet as they had seemed to Margarete Reen, an eighteen-year-old girl from Zaandam, brought up on pastors' sermons, on the inventions of the gutter press and the romances of the cheap cinema.

The Russians—it was they who had liberated Margarete and her fellow countrymen. Thanks to them she would soon see her mother, her home town and the seashore.

She was full of gratitude to the Russians. For the first time in three years of wandering she felt herself under the protection of a mighty and friendly power. That power was embodied in the small, well-built, grey-eyed captain.

Margarete looked at him enchanted and was highly pleased that he was not tall, just a little taller than she was and not, God forbid, like Peter I, of whom she would probably have been afraid.

In the presence of the Captain she felt safe from the old Baroness von Borkau, the manager and all the various "amts," "rats," "leiters" and "führers"—that strange and fearsome chorus, which had now dispersed, like evil spirits at the break of day.

VII

Oganesyan arrived at the estate next morning. Anticipating the pleasure that lay before him, he walked at unusual speed, taking the steps in a single stride.

He seemed to be returning to something which he had abandoned at the time somehow without pain or difficulty—to his prewar job of museum guide, not a particularly distinguished job at that. With a sharp pang of joy Oganesyan recognized within himself the old, half-forgotten feeling for his early, far-away life among canvases glowing with the warm colours of paints, his sense of its unique quality for him. Before the war innumerable excursions of schoolchildren, workers and Red Army men visited the museum of fine arts where he worked.

Oganesyan liked explaining pictures to Red Army men, but in those days the pictures had been nearer and more comprehensible to him than these fine, serious lads, full of respect for art. They would be unaffectedly surprised to find so many ideas and details concealed in the painted, lifeless canvases. Full of faith in the upward curve of human progress, they listened with some distrust to Oganesyan's stories about the lost secrets of the old masters and their unsurpassed achievements in colour and composition. During the war years he had seen the museum visitors not in the museum but going about the business of life and at their military duties.

They were people interested in everything on earth, longing to master and to understand everything. An enor-

mous desire for knowledge was one of the finest traits in their character. They loved the interpreter too, because he "knew everything." They loved to hear his tales about artists and most of all, about Leonardo da Vinci, whom they, men of a practical turn of mind, valued especially for his mathematical and technical genius.

The fact that the soldiers were vividly interested in all this pleased and cheered Oganessian, who had at first decided there would now be nothing in life but trenches, artillery positions, irksome German prisoners, mournful windy nights and filthy dugouts. But the soldiers were wiser and shrewder than he. They had known what he himself realized only later: everything lay ahead, there would be life and it was for this they were fighting.

Now that he was about to see some pictures again, he felt with renewed force that art was not at all so partitioned off from the adversities of life at the front and from the fate of the officers and soldiers surrounding him. After all, pictures were half a museum. The other half was its visitors.

Accompanied by Chokhov and a senior sergeant with a black moustache, who seemed to be the company's Party organizer, Oganessian walked slowly into the drawing room where, below the numerous stags' antlers, hung the pictures.

There were some quite good copies here: the "Mona Lisa" of Leonardo da Vinci, the Vienna "Venus" and the Leningrad "Perseus and Andromeda" of Rubens, and the Dresden "Venus" by Giorgione. Beside them hung landscapes and still lifes by various German artists.

Oganessian felt as delighted as if he had met old friends. He knew the history of every picture down to the remotest details. What had happened to his sleepiness and apathy! Antonyuk would not have recognized his interpreter in this active, smiling man, who now looked several years younger.

Slivenko, not wishing to miss such a convenient opportunity of raising the cultural standard of his soldiers, summoned to the drawing room all the personnel free from routine duties.

Surrounded by soldiers, Oganessian began to explain the idea and composition of the pictures in that solemn and weighty tone peculiar to professional museum guides.

It was as if there were no war going on, as if bloody battles did not still lie ahead of the soldiers, so attentively did they listen to the explanations of pictures painted five centuries ago in the now not so distant Italy.

Oganessian's inspiration grew as he stood by the Giocondo and looked rapturously and lovingly at her:

"In the spring of 1503 Leonardo painted a portrait of Mona Lisa, the second wife of the illustrious Florentine townsman Francesco di Bartolommeo del Giocondo. Who would now remember this man and his wife, were it not for the brush of the great master? Mona Lisa was born in Naples in 1479 and married when she was sixteen years of age. Here she sits with gracious ease in an armchair, her elbows resting on its arms. Please look at her face. Look closely.

"What kind of a face is it? Why have men been writing, talking and arguing about it for almost five hundred years? The face of Giocondo expresses much. Some say—modesty, others—tenderness, still others—shyness mingled with secret desires. A fourth thinks that it expresses pride, even haughtiness. There have even been critics who ascribed to that face an expression of irony, defiance and even cruelty! The mysteriousness of that lovely smile has become proverbial. Which of the definitions is the most correct? Probably all of them. In this Florentine woman's fleeting smile the artist has succeeded in expressing the many-sided character of a woman, ardent and modest, tender and cruel...."

Oganesyan mopped his brow and surveyed the serious faces of the soldiers triumphantly. He had made his point: the woman on the canvas was no longer simply a painted picture for them but an event, a problem. They studied her with deep attention.

"In our town," said one soldier unhurriedly, "they opened a museum before the war. It's got a lot of good pictures. That one is there too. It's a famous picture. There's always a lot of people round it."

"That Mona Lisa," said Semiglav, "I saw it in Moscow, when I was on an excursion. They were telling a story about its being stolen from a museum."

"Yes," confirmed Oganesyan, "in 1911 the original was stolen from a Paris museum and was only discovered two years later in Florence."

A short, elderly soldier with reddish hair suddenly asked:

"And how much does a picture like that cost?"

The soldiers started to hush him up, and Oganesyan coughed angrily, but answered:

"A lot. Not less than half a million."

The soldier gasped, then decided that they were leading him on and said scornfully:

"In German marks, eh?"

Oganesyan turned pale with indignation. He began to prove heatedly to Pichugin that half a million was probably not even the correct figure, that the picture was worth perhaps not less than a million. And in gold, not marks!

Then Pichugin believed it. He stopped thoughtfully opposite this smiling woman with folded arms, and shook his head reproachfully as if in surprise at human stupidity. Everybody had long ago passed on to the other pictures but Pichugin continued to stand by the Mona Lisa.

The soldiers liked Giorgione's and Rubens' women very much.

"That's beauty for you!" exclaimed Sergeant-Major Godunov, who had dropped in for a minute to listen.

Oganesyan flushed with pleasure as if he himself had been praised.

"And this all belongs to the landowner," said Slivenko. "Only she could look at them, the old witch!"

Oganesyan suddenly remembered where he was and that he was looking at pictures which were the private property of some German landowner.

"Indeed, how silly that is!" he grumbled.

Chokhov invited Oganesyan to lunch.

While the meal was being prepared, the interpreter decided to look over the establishment. He went into the next room, which turned out to be a library, and browsed among the books. There was no longer any Hitlerite literature: they must have destroyed it in good time. On the other hand, on the table in a prominent position, were displayed books by Dostoyevsky and Gogol in German and a small volume of Heine, brought out of the cupboard "in honour" of the arrival of the Russians. Madame von Borkau was being "correct."

Oganesyan went downstairs and saw a young fair-haired girl slowly mounting the broad staircase. Noticing the unknown officer the girl stopped, leaned against the banisters and looked at him shyly and at the same time rather impudently.

Slivenko who had accompanied the interpreter told Oganesyan what he knew about Margarete.

Oganesyan could appreciate beauty besides that depicted on canvas. He looked at Margarete with pleasure, then spoke to her. For Margarete it was a pleasant surprise that the dark officer expressed himself in excellent German.

Learning that the girl was Dutch, Oganesyan began to question her about Flemish painting and the fate of their museums. But her knowledge of that subject was

vague. She admitted this without a trace of embarrassment. After all she had left Holland when she was only sixteen.

Captain Chokhov appeared at the door above.

"Lunch is ready," he said.

Oganessian asked Chokhov to invite Margarete to the table.

"All right, invite her," said Chokhov shortly. He was very glad. He would not have dared to do so himself.

Margarete sat between Chokhov and Oganessian and was radiant with pride to be lunching with two Russian officers. She answered Oganessian's questions glibly and at length, and from time to time asked him to translate what she said to Captain Vasil. What a pity that *her* captain knew neither Dutch nor German.

In 1942 Margarete and some other young people had been sent off to Germany for the harvest period, or so they were promised when they were recruited. And here she was, having spent almost three years on foreign soil. Admittedly the Germans had treated them, the Dutch, far better than the representatives of other nationalities, because, as they explained, the Dutch belonged to the German race. The Dutch were able to move freely about the streets and associate with the German population. They had no shameful patches sewn to their backs as the Russians and the Poles had. They were allowed to receive letters from home and to answer them.

Nevertheless, it had been humiliating and terrible. They had led the life of migratory forced labourers driven from camp to camp, and from province to province.

Margarete had travelled over half Germany, working in an underground aircraft factory in the foothills of the Harz mountains, packing cartridges in Stettin, bringing in the harvest on the big estates of Thüringen.

She had been in this place since last year.

What had she not seen in these three years, this slender vagrant beauty! What did she not know! There had been insolent men and shameless women, and savage overseers and ruthless masters.

She had been in prison.

Once the workers of the aircraft factory had demanded that the administration do something about their living quarters. The foreign workers were living in wooden barracks with leaking roofs. The place was full of huge rats. But the instigators were arrested, and so were Margarete and her friend Anya, a Russian girl from Smolensk.

Anya did not come out of prison. She was tortured horribly during the cross-examination. Margarete, however, probably because of her German blood, was not really beaten badly. It was a terrible time.

Oganesyan listened with deep attention. In Margarete's words, and not even so much in her words as in her tone, he sensed a bitter cynicism, disbelief in people, in their honesty and decency. Probably she had been pretty well spoiled, she did not care two straws about anything. But perhaps that was only a defensive pose, the result of three years of humiliation and the necessity of existing somehow, of enduring the vagrant's life, life in a large mousetrap.

When she had told them everything about herself, Margarete in her turn peppered Oganesyan with questions. She wanted to know what would happen after the war. Would they hang Hitler?

Was it true that in Russia there were no landowners and, in general, no rich people. Was it correct that in Russia everybody was a Communist? And was Captain Vasil a Communist? And do they marry in Russia? Because the newspapers said that in Russia they did not marry but just lived together.

Oganesyan flared up and said that that was an impudent lie and that the newspapers lied, and they lied just

because in Russia there really were no landowners and no moneybags. Then Margarete wanted to know if Oganessian was married. He said that he was and showed Margarete a photograph of his wife.

For some time Margarete looked at the photograph of a beautiful, large-eyed woman in a fur coat.

"You have a beautiful wife," she said quietly; after a pause she asked if Captain Vasil was married.

Oganessian translated her question to Chokhov.

"No," said Chokhov.

Margarete understood, blushed and asked quickly:

"Is it true that it is always cold in Russia?"

Oganessian burst out laughing.

Then he set about explaining what Russia was, that lemons and oranges grew in the South and that in the Far North, on the shores of the Arctic Ocean, it was really cold. In the central regions there was an ordinary European climate. And as he talked about Russia, Oganessian grew more eloquent. In a voice trembling with emotion he began to describe the beauties of his native land. He told the girl about the snowy mountains of the Caucasus, about the long straight avenues of Leningrad and Moscow, about rich collective farms and boundless fields.

She listened very closely, sometimes asking: "Really?" "Like that?" and from time to time saying, as if to herself: "I must tell them about that at home."

She asked if she could go to Russia. "It's very good there," she added.

Oganessian thought for a moment and answered that everywhere it was necessary to do as the Russians had done in their own country.

"That's what your sergeant with the moustache was telling us," said the girl, surprised at such unanimity. "Marek translated it to us. He's our Czech, who understands Russian."

She had just risen to leave but stopped suddenly at

the door and said very shyly, concealing her blue eyes with her eyelashes, and noticeably moved:

"I told your comrades that I have a husband. But he's not my husband at all, he is simply Willem Hart from Utrecht. I said it so that the soldiers would not bother me. . . . I am not married."

And Margarete ran out of the room.

"Poor girl!" said Oganessian. He translated the girl's last words to Chokhov, then said thoughtfully: "One could paint a picture of her—'Europe abducted by the bull' . . . But the bull must not be fair and handsome as the artists used to paint him, but thin, rabid, wild, repulsive like fascism."

Mythological subjects, however, did not interest Chokhov. When Oganessian had left, Chokhov remained at the table, full of vague and solemn thoughts about himself and about the world.

VIII

Colonel Vorobyov's division went into action ahead of the other divisions of the corps. The first wounded to arrive in the Medical Battalion told of continuous and stubborn German tank attacks.

Soon German bombers appeared and dropped several bombs on the village where the Medical Battalion was quartered.

The usual front-line life began, full of alarms.

Late at night a car from Divisional Headquarters arrived in the village with orders for the leading surgeon to report at the Divisional Commander's O. P.

The officer who had come in the car kept on hurrying Tanya, but did not say what the matter was. He only told her to take along everything necessary for an operation.

They drove off. The car passed several ruined villages, soon turned off along a narrow footpath and began to jolt over the frozen hillocks of a field. The whole place was thundering and groaning. Machine-gun fire could be heard very close by.

In a little hollow, under a low hill covered with young fir trees, the car stopped; the officer jumped out, helped Tanya out and said:

"We'll go on on foot."

They began to walk up the hill. Shells were bursting ahead and to the right. Soon Tanya noticed a freshly-dug trench which led to the top of the hill.

"Come this way, please," the officer made a gesture, as if he were motioning her into a box at the theatre.

She walked along the trench. It was wet and muddy. The trench led her to the entrance of a dugout covered with logs.

In the half-dark room people were sitting on the floor and at the openings in the wall. Someone, quite hoarse, was talking on the telephone.

"Is that the doctor?" A voice came out of the darkness.

"Yes."

A small wooden door opened.

"Come in, Koltsova," Tanya heard the Divisional Commander's voice.

A candle was burning on a little table behind a partition. By its dim light Tanya could see Colonel Vorobyov, lying on a sofa. He extended a big white arm with the sleeve rolled up, and said calmly:

"Sh, don't tell anyone! Or they'll start a row and order me back to the rear. It's just a trifling scratch. Look."

The wound turned out to be not quite so trifling. The German bullet, although a spent one, had apparently lodged itself in the soft tissues of the arm, below the elbow.

"You'll have to go to the Medical Battalion," said Tanya decisively.

"I'm not going anywhere out of this O.P."

"You will, Comrade Colonel."

"I won't. My division is fighting. The German is pressing hard. And you say 'Go, go!'"

"If you don't listen to me I shall immediately inform the Corps Commander and the Army Commander—and they will order you."

Vorobyov said in an offended tone:

"I do not permit you to inform them. In my division I am the commander."

"Till the first wound," retorted Tanya. "Once you have a bullet in your arm, I am in command."

"But I shan't let you leave here."

"Yes, you will. I have many wounded, not only you."

Vorobyov said imploringly:

"Koltsova, my dear! I beg of you! . . . Be kind! . . . How can I stay there, with the Medical Battalion! I just can't! Do the operation here."

He added quietly: "There are heavy losses in the division. . . ."

Tanya hesitated, then asked for water to wash her hands.

They started bustling round her. Tanya laid out the instruments and began to operate. The Divisional Commander did not let out a sound or a groan. The telephone rang. The Army Commander was calling up Vorobyov. He took the receiver in his sound hand and, wincing with pain, answered the Army Commander with affected cheerfulness:

"Yes. I will. It shall be done. I am throwing in my reserve. Everything will be all right. I'll drive them back."

When the operation was over and the bandages in place, the Colonel, pale and sweating, threw himself back on his pillows and said with boyish pride:

"We're tough, we are! Frontier men! Thanks, Tanechka! Mind, don't breathe a word to anyone! . . . Just as soon

as we smash the Nazis I'll come to you to change the bandage. Hey! Look after the doctor for me!" he shouted to someone in the other room. "Take her down the communication trench! . . . There's no one here to operate on her!"

As she left, Tanya heard his voice addressing the officers: .

"Now to business! How's Savelyev getting on?"

Tanya returned to the Medical Battalion in good spirits. Stirred by the atmosphere of the front line, she quite forgot her own griefs.

At the Medical Battalion she was told that Krasikov had recently been there and asked about her. On learning that she had left for an unknown destination and had still not returned, he had seemed very disappointed, although he tried to hide it.

He came again the next day. Tanya had just finished a routine operation. She was glad to see him and immediately began to ask him about the situation at the front.

Contrary to his custom he did not answer her questions. Without taking off his greatcoat he looked at her full in the face and at length said:

"Excuse me, Tatyana Vladimirovna, but I am a soldier and I like to act openly. I have been told that at Schneidemühl some major came to see you and then you were absent for the whole day. And yesterday you were away at night. I, of course, have no right to question you but . . . I am suffering. I myself did not even expect. . . . Or will you start laughing again?"

She did not laugh, but neither did she answer him.

Then he suddenly asked her to become his wife and, pacing about the room, said that he could not live without her and asked her to break with the man whom she had visited yesterday.

In reply to this she could not help laughing, and he exclaimed angrily:

"You are laughing again!"

He looked unhappy and upset.

Tanya was moved. She had not imagined that Semyon Semyonovich loved her so much, and that love could so much change this usually self-confident and balanced man.

She was deeply sorry for him and, being incapable of pretence, said:

"I shall not tell you where I was yesterday. I am bound by my word. In any case it wasn't on personal affairs. And the Major. . . . The Major will not come any more. He will never come. He is dead."

She was called to the operating tent, and promptly left.

IX

Although Tanya had not said a word in reply to Semyon Semyonovich's proposal, it seemed to him that everything was decided. This pleased him but, at the same time, he was frightened and slightly regretted the proposal he had made on the spur of the moment. He thought with alarm of his wife and daughter. And not so much of them as of how General Sizokrylov would look upon the whole affair.

After his talk with Tanya, in spite of his doubts and fears, he sought meetings with her still more insistently than before. The uncertainty weighed upon him. Of course it would have been better to forget about her altogether, but that was no longer within his power.

Tanya, however, had no idea of what was going on in Semyon Semyonovich's mind and spoke to him on the telephone warmly and kept on promising to visit him, but work at the Medical Battalion delayed her.

At last she found time to go.

Sitting at the wheel of the car, Tanya glimpsed the German villages flying past. The white flags on the fences and in the eaves fluttered in the wind. It was already fairly warm and the tang of spring was in the air.

Corps Headquarters was situated in a small town. Soldiers and liberated prisoners of war were walking about the streets. Tanya soon left the crowds behind and turned into a quiet side street.

"Here we are," said the driver, pointing at a stone wall, behind which a little garden and a house with two small towers could be seen.

Tanya drove in at the gates. An orderly who had heard the noise of the car, came out on to the steps.

"The Colonel will be here shortly," he said. "He asked you to wait for him."

Tanya went into the house, took off her greatcoat and sat down at the writing table, on which Krasikov's field bag and binoculars were lying. The typewritten sheets of some official report were also on the table. For want of something to do, Tanya began to read them.

They contained materials of an investigation concerning a certain Battalion Commander—Major Veselchakov Ilya Petrovich, and Sergeant-Major of the Medical Service, Korotchenkova Glafira Petrovna. This couple were living in a battalion as husband and wife, contrary to regulations.

The officer who had conducted the investigation reported that Veselchakov I. P. was one of the best battalion commanders in the division, three times decorated, four times wounded; a worker, a member of the Party since 1938, had a flawless record, in the army since the first day of the war, had earlier taken part in the battles on the Halhin-Gol and in Finland. The Major stated that he had fallen in love with Korotchenkova G. P. and wanted to live with her in the future, on the termination of the Great Patriotic War. Members of the Party who had been consulted confirmed that Veselchakov and Korotchenkova were a model of mutual love, respect and comradely friendship. Korotchenkova G. P.—not a member of the Party, called up into the army in 1942, had been wounded,

decorated with the Order of the Red Star and a medal "For Fighting Services." In spite of several offers to transfer her as a first-class medical worker to less dangerous work in the Medical Battalion or regimental aid station, she had categorically refused to do so and spent the whole war in the battalion, on the front line. She had nine commendations from the command of the regiment for the exemplary management of medical work in the battalion.

Conclusion: consider the transfer of Korotchenkova inexpedient.

Having read through this tricky affair Tanya smiled, but then the smile faded away and she grew thoughtful.

The hooting of a car and people's voices sounded outside the window. Someone had come in with Krasikov, and Tanya went into the next room, not wishing to meet the Colonel's colleagues. Sitting in a chair at the window which looked out into a garden covered with dirty, wet snow, she could not help eavesdropping on the conversation between Krasikov and another Colonel—the Chief of the Corps Political Department, Vengerov, whose voice Tanya recognized.

Krasikov asked:

"Colonel, have you read this report about Veselchakov? Preposterous! Look at the conclusion!"

Vengerov said calmly:

"I know. . . . Plotnikov was telling me about that affair. They are good people, and fight well. Give me that file, I'll look into it."

"But you must agree," said Krasikov, "that this cannot go on. It's no good. They met at the front! . . . I've heard of such friendships before! It must be stopped, as an example to others, especially married people. It's not for me to explain to you how important the moral factor is."

Then they talked about troop movements. At length Vengerov stood up to go. The voices grew fainter. A car's engine roared. It grew quiet. Semyon Semyonovich's

heavy footsteps could be heard. He was walking about the room and calling softly:

"Tanya, Tanya, where are you?"

She was sitting in the darkness and did not want to reply. And she did not want to see Krasikov's face.

But then the door opened and he appeared on the threshold, big and, apparently, very pleased with himself. Coming into the dark room he did not notice Tanya and went on calling quietly:

"Tanya, Tanya, where are you?"

Receiving no answer he felt his way further along to the door, opened it, stood looking into the darkness and, laughing, said:

"Oh, you big tease, Tanya! . . . Where are you, Tanya?"

Tanya was silent. When Krasikov vanished into the next room, she stood up and went into the brightly lighted study—where the field bag and binoculars and the typewritten reports lay on the desk. A minute later Krasikov returned from one of the rooms, chuckling.

He was utterly surprised to see the cold look in Tanya's eyes. Learning the cause of her anger he cursed himself mentally for his careless words and began to make excuses.

"Why compare the two things?" he asked, trying to hide his confusion. "It's just a matter of saving a good battalion commander from a nuisance of a woman!"

She said:

"It's no use making excuses. What you were saying about these two people may be completely just. The point is that your words ought to apply to yourself. There cannot be two sets of morals: one for some and another—for others."

He looked on helplessly and silently as she buttoned up her greatcoat and put on her belt. Seeing that Tanya was actually going to leave, he said hoarsely:

"You shan't go anywhere."

He went close up to her. But she showed no fear and smiling unexpectedly, said:

"Mind. I'll write to Sizokrylov."

Needless to say, Krasikov at once retired to the window and when he turned round, she was no longer in the room.

Tanya went out into the courtyard. The driver's seat was empty. The ignition key was sticking out of its slot. Without much hesitation she sat down at the wheel and stepped on the self-starter.

It seemed very dark driving until Tanya remembered that she had forgotten to switch on the headlights. She must have been far more disturbed than she herself had realized. She pressed the button and the road lighted up. The car jolted through the dark streets of the small town.

Then she heard behind her a light rustle: the driver was sleeping on the back seat. That was good, he would take the car back.

Tanya suddenly laughed, remembering what an impression the mention of the member of the Military Council had made on Krasikov. But that was really no laughing matter. Tanya grew very sad.

After all, Krasikov had not been just a kind acquaintance: he occupied quite a place in her life. In all adversities and troubles, in the grind of continuous work, she had grown used to remembering that she had a friend, Semyon Semyonovich, a responsive, reliable and loving friend.

How could she have been so mistaken about the man! She felt very lonely.

Meanwhile the traffic on the road was increasing. Dark shadows met the car. Rain was falling on the soldiers' caps. Capes were flapping, boots tramping, the car's headlights shone, now on a cart, now on the barrel of an anti-aircraft gun sticking upwards, now on the long snout of an anti-tank rifle, now on someone's calm face. Perhaps she would soon see that very face on the operating table. And then Tanya would cease being an ordinary woman

and would become a person indispensable to people at war—a surgeon.

The driver woke up and asked sleepily:

"Is that you, Tatyana Vladimirovna?"

"It is."

"Have I been sleeping?"

"Yes. We'll soon be there, you will take the car back."

X

To Glasha's great distress the division medical officer handed her a written order to report to the Chief of the Corps Medical Service. That meant she had been transferred not only out of the battalion but out of the division altogether.

The division medical officer, who was sick and tired of the whole business, hunched himself in his chair, expecting tears and reproaches. Being of small physique he was slightly afraid of this huge woman. But nothing happened. After reading the order Glasha only sighed, then looked at him very intently and with a kind of pity, and after the usual questions concerning the whereabouts of Corps Headquarters and how to get there she left.

Besides the grief caused by her separation from Vesselchakov, she was burdened by yet another painful feeling. Glasha herself did not understand what was the matter with her. But then she realized that this was her second day without work; she was unaccustomed to this idleness and distressed by it.

While she was waiting for a passing car to take her to the Corps Headquarters she saw a soldier with a bandaged head walking along the road, and called out to him:

"What's the matter, dear? Been wounded?"

"No," replied the soldier unwillingly, "boils. Curerunculus."

"Furunculosis," corrected Glasha.

The bandage had slipped out of place and Glasha—not without difficulty—persuaded the soldier to let her rebandage his head. She did this quickly and skilfully and the soldier could not help softening towards her.

They climbed into a car together and the journey passed unnoticed for Glasha. She heaped medical advice on her companion, questioned him about his family and his home. When the soldier recounted something sad—the death of his brother and his son's illness—she would shake her head and sigh loudly. When he spoke about something cheerful—about a big catch on the White Sea or about his son's recovery—she would smile, nodding joyfully and ask:

"Really? Just like that? That is good!"

He turned out to be from the North, from the White Sea coast and spoke in the strange dialect of that region, to the wonder of all his companions.

After two days at the corps Glasha was assigned to work in the Medical Battalion of another division, and she immediately made her way there.

A pity that the man from the White Sea was no longer with her. He had left for some destination on his own front-line road. Glasha's new companion was a young lieutenant with a bandaged cheek. He kept on putting his hand to his cheek and cursing mournfully to himself.

Glasha took a little bottle of alcohol out of her kit, and soaking a piece of cotton wool, placed it on the lieutenant's aching tooth. She even gave him a little of the alcohol to drink. To comfort him further, she told him that her teeth often ached (which was not true) and that there was no worse pain on earth.

The alcohol which the lieutenant drank, loosened the tongues of all the soldiers travelling with them. Each of them considered it his duty to report his own troubles to

the tenderhearted Glasha and tell her what he thought about toothache.

"Only in childbirth is the pain worse," said Glasha, although she herself had never had any children, "but, then, you can't do anything about it. That's our bitter lot, you can't refuse it and you can't get out of it—give birth and afterwards bury them."

She was very moved by her own words and remembered her Veselchakov as if she had given birth to him and was now burying him.

In the Medical Battalion she was assigned to a surgery company as a nurse. She went to report to the chief surgeon.

The chief surgeon, to Glasha's surprise, turned out to be a young woman, slender, tall and beautiful, a little pale and sad. Her uniform coat fitted so well that it did not look like a greatcoat but rather like an elegant town coat. It only needed a silver fox. Fashionable one! thought Glasha. Only in the large grey eyes of the chief surgeon, as Glasha noticed with a certain satisfaction, was there an expression of some strength and severity which perhaps meant she was worth something after all.

Her name was Tatyana Vladimirovna Koltsova.

When she learnt that the new nurse was called Glafira Petrovna Korotchenkova, Tanya looked in surprise at Glasha, then stood up, walked about the room and finally asked:

"Where did you work before?"

Glasha began to tell her, but Tanya was looking at her small crimson mouth and her hands. The hands were small and plump, but of perfect shape and—most important of all—expressed untold kindness.

That's the kind of woman you are, thought Tanya. She remembered what Krasikov had said about this woman. So it was from her that he wanted "to save" that battalion commander.

Of course, appearances can be deceptive.

"Well, you have had a lot of experience. You can start work," said Tanya dryly.

Tanya kept an attentive eye on the new surgery nurse all the time. Glasha turned out to be talkative and amusing. She would not sleep for nights on end, was sorry for everybody, ready to substitute for anyone at any work and carried weights enough for two men.

"That's nothing to what we did in our battalion!" she would say with pride.

She bore her separation without a murmur. Perhaps it was all the same to her? Perhaps the love of everybody—and she was loved in the Medical Battalion—was capable of replacing Veselchakov's love?

Only once, going into the tent late at night, did Tanya find her in tears.

"Has somebody offended you?" asked Tanya.

Glasha stood up, wiped away her tears with the backs of both hands and said:

"No. Who would offend me? A woman's just got to have a cry sometimes, there's no life for her without it. All the more so, for a great big woman like me. If I didn't cry what would happen?"

She completely recovered while saying this and even smiled. Tanya's heart was touched.

"Are you lonely?"

"Yes, I am lonely," answered Glasha.

The last word was pronounced with a very broad "o" (Glasha was from the town of Murom where they stress their o's like that), and it really did express great loneliness.

After a silence she said:

"And who isn't lonely now? My man's still alive at any rate... But others'... and yours too, Tatyana Vladimirovna, I was told... your man was killed..."

At that moment Tanya, who was always very restrained, suddenly wanted to tell Glasha about her

meeting with Lubentsov and about his death. But Glasha suddenly blushed and said:

"I'm sorry if I said something out of place. I'll go."

Understanding the hint Tanya, deeply wounded, frowned and kept silent while Glasha, confusedly mumbling excuses, left the tent.

Tanya shook her head sadly. She thought how happy, really, this big, kind woman was: she loved and was loved, and her separation from her husband would end very soon—together with the war.

XI

Pichugin was walking about the courtyard, absent-minded and very cheerful. Sergeant-Major Godunov noticed this and asked:

"What are you so pleased about, Pichugin?"

"I'm not pleased. I was just . . ." answered Pichugin, rather scared.

And he tried to put on a serious air, but the smile crept out from his sparse, yellowish moustache and his thin, cunning mouth that reeked of tobacco.

What am I hanging about like this for?—he thought. Then he realized that he was looking for Slivenko. Pichugin had been feeling a constant urge lately to tell Slivenko about everything and then, grinning distrustfully, to listen to what Slivenko would say.

At last he found the Party organizer.

Evening was already coming on. Slivenko had just returned from the regiment's Political Department, to which he had been summoned for a Party organizers' meeting about the coming battles.

He arrived loaded with pamphlets, newspapers and the blank forms of "battle newssheets." On the way back

he had been met by a big, rejoicing crowd of Russian people going home.

Although his daughter had not been among them Slivenko was happy. His lips were sore with kisses and his hands ached from the shaking they had received. There had been two girls from a mining settlement near Voroshilovgrad. Now, after the liberation, they only wanted one thing: to get into the army. Tall, well-built and dark, these girls reminded him of Galya's girl friends who used to come to her to prepare their lessons and read poetry.

On his return to the company Slivenko reported to the Sergeant-Major and then went into the house. Pichugin met him on the stairs. And since both soldiers were beaming and both had something to tell, they sat down at the window. Slivenko spoke first, because Pichugin decided to be last: he thought his story more important.

But Slivenko's tale of the liberated Russian people aroused his emotion.

"There'll be a lot of work to do!" said Slivenko, twisting his moustache thoughtfully. "These ruined towns and burnt out villages of ours. We've got to put things right quickly, find shoes and clothes for people. . . ."

"M-yes," murmured Pichugin. "The people have suffered. . . . Oh well, never mind, everything will be all right!"

He thumped his chest with his little fist and placed his bag down in front of Slivenko.

"There, look!"

"Box-calf leather again?"

"Oh no! I threw that out," said Pichugin complacently.

"No!" Slivenko was surprised. "You mean to say you threw it out?"

Looking triumphantly at Slivenko, Pichugin opened his kit bag. In it lay little white boxes and in them small cylindrical objects, like pencil leads.

"Flints for lighters," said Slivenko, puzzled.

Tipping the flints lovingly from one hand to the other, Pichugin said:

"There now! Still haven't counted them all. On the boxes I have counted there's a cross. And the others I haven't counted yet."

Looking up at Slivenko's serious face, Pichugin suddenly burst out: "Why are you looking at me like that? You know what it'll be like in our village after the Germans? There'll be no matches! People will have nothing to light up with, except 'Katyushas.' Mark my words! For a flint like that you'll be able to get five rubles."

"Well, you are a scoundrel!" said Slivenko, both surprised and indignant.

Pichugin did not take offence, but just laughed like an adult at the foolishness of a child.

Slivenko spoke sadly and reproachfully: "Here's the whole world falling to pieces, the dead rising from their graves and you want to get five rubles for your flints? Fixed the price already, have you? Perhaps you'd let 'em go cheaper wholesale? You, moneygrubber! Get out of my sight!" Slivenko stood up with a jerk and ended: "Just you try and speculate! We made mincemeat out of people like that before and we'll do it again!"

Pichugin ruffled up all over, grabbed his "old kit bag" in both hands and ran out of the room, but stopped on the threshold, turned to Slivenko and asked quietly:

"You won't tell the Captain, will you?"

"Wait a minute," answered Slivenko after a moment's silence. "Why did you come to me about those flints? Making a report to the Party organizer? Perhaps you wanted to find out from me whether you were doing right or not?"

"Perhaps so," answered Pichugin with sullen evasiveness.

Slivenko gave a laugh.

"You're making a mistake, Pichugin!" He walked up close to Pichugin and said: "We've built all this artillery, all these tanks and aeroplanes, equipped such an army, clothed and booted them, given the peasants tractors, we are smashing the Germans who grabbed the whole of Europe, we have almost gone as far as Berlin—and you worry about matches? You want to get rich on it? You damn fool! Well, drag your flints about with you, on your back! You'll soon throw them away! But as far as I am concerned I'll tell you this: I can't feather my own nest when it's bad for other people all round. Never could before and I can't now either. I know some can. And you try, if you want. But I can't!"

Pichugin was very gloomy when he left Slivenko. The smile had vanished from his face. Slivenko's words had stung him far more than he ever thought they could. He coughed nervously and mumbled to himself: "I was wrong to tell him! It's stirred me up properly!"

In the courtyard the Captain called to him from the window. Pichugin froze to the spot in fear. But no, the Captain did not know anything about his absence. He said:

"Why haven't you cleaned your rifle? It's dirty and unoiled," Chokhov paused, then said with unusual loquacity, pronouncing the words with some effort: "Since he is a representative of a liberating army, the Soviet soldier must be an example of discipline to everybody. You may go, Pichugin."

Sighing with relief Pichugin went away to clean his rifle.

Looking out of the window Chokhov saw Margarete.

She was standing among the soldiers and explaining something animatedly to them with the help of her hands and dazzling smiles. Noticing Chokhov she smiled at him too.

He gave her a brief nod and went away from the window.

He was very reserved towards her, and that surprised Margarete. The soldiers were embarrassed by the presence of her husband (Gogoberidze had disrespectfully dubbed him "the Dutch cheese") but after all, the Captain knew that she had no husband.

For this European girl, a wartime vagrant, who had for so long spun round like a grain of dust in the black whirlwind of the occupation, war and camp life, and was used to regarding everything with a large measure of cynicism, the Russian officer's reserve was incomprehensible.

Her friend and namesake, the thirty-three-year-old French woman, Margot Mélier, said to her:

"You have grown unaccustomed to human respect, that's all. He simply respects you, this delightful Captain. Soldiers will be soldiers, but here, you know, it's surprising how they respect us!" She smiled meaningfully: "Sometimes even too much!"

Whether it was so or not, Margarete's life became happy and interesting. Although travelling parties were already being organized, the girl was hoping in her heart that she would leave with the Russian Captain. He would take her away with him to his wonderful country. Although schedules and routes for getting back home were being discussed, it seemed to her that she would be home far later than the rest. Marek, the Czech, was teaching her Russian, and she already knew a score of words with which she intended, in time, to take the Captain by surprise.

What unheard-of happiness it was to run freely and at will about the places where two weeks ago they had had to walk quietly, cautiously, fearing to be seen by the German inhabitants! How pleasant to notice the ingratiating looks of the numerous townswomen evacuees from Berlin, who had formerly treated the foreigners with contemptuous familiarity, as if they were people of an inferior race.

It was growing warmer. Almost a real spring breeze was blowing along the village streets. The bustle of people, the noise of the main road, the white flags on the village houses—it all seemed like a universal marriage feast, people seemed to be intoxicated, joyfully excited and very kind.

In the evening it rained and soon turned into a real downpour. Margarete, who had been sitting sewing with her friends, ran out into the street. Heavy drops of warm spring rain fell on her face.

For the first time for some years Margarete felt like a young girl. She ran about, skipping and repeating aloud the Russian words she had remembered.

In the courtyard she talked with some Russians, coquetted a little with the dark soldier who always threw such ardent glances at her, and then went upstairs, to "her" captain.

She found him in the study that had belonged to the baroness's runaway son. The Captain, sitting with his back to the door, was turning over the leaves of a thin little book. She stood there for a minute without moving, then coughed shyly. He turned round and stood up.

A big lamp was burning on the table. It was quiet and cozy.

She smiled. He smiled too. Growing bolder she came up closer to him, and then—in some unaccountable way—they kissed an unexpected kiss, quick and smelling of fresh rain.

In the next room, where somebody was on watch, the telephone buzzed loudly and insistently. Recovering himself at once Chokhov gently pushed the girl aside and went out.

Veselchakov gave orders that the company should be alerted. Take the road immediately. Send a cart for ammunition.

Chokhov put down the receiver and returned to his room. Margarete was sitting quietly on the window sill. He walked past her, went into the drawing room, passed through a few other empty rooms and finding himself in the guardroom, which had once been a boudoir, gave Godunov the necessary orders.

And Margarete sat on the window sill, wet-haired, happy, looking at the rain, at the thickening darkness and waiting.

The soldiers took their rifles and sub-machine guns from the rack, looked them over rapidly and went out into the courtyard to form ranks. And here they heard from far away to the north the rumble of artillery fire.

The war was still on. Pichugin was fussing about under a tree fixing the straps of his pack. Semiglav was saddling the captain's horse. Cigarettes began to glow in the darkness.

The soldiers noticed the baroness. She was standing craning her fat, flabby neck and listening to the distant gunfire. Noticing that she was being watched, the old woman stepped away and vanished.

The sentry opened the gates. They creaked mournfully. The ammunition cart plunged into the darkness.

The former labourers came into the courtyard in a bunch. They were alarmed by the roar of artillery and the way the Russians were silently forming up in ranks, apparently about to leave.

"Company, 'tenshun!" commanded Godunov deafeningly.

Chokhov came out of the house. He was wearing a greatcoat and field belt. Semiglav led the horse out of the stall.

"Comrade Captain," reported Godunov, clicking his heels. "The company is on the alert and assembled in full. No one is sick. Sergeant Gogoberidze has gone to fetch ammunition as you ordered."

Chokhov walked slowly along the ranks. In the distance the cannonade rumbled again.

"At ease!" said Chokhov. Then he turned round to the foreigners standing at the gate and said: "Watch the landowner. If she does anything, you can liquidate her as a class. I permit it." He added: "You have nothing to be afraid of. You are complete masters here."

The Czech excitedly asked if they might not leave together with the Russians. And be given rifles.

Chokhov answered briefly:

"No."

Sergeant-Major Godunov ordered:

"Pichugin, harness the carriage."

Chokhov said curtly:

"Don't. Leave it behind."

"Yes!" boomed Godunov, hiding his surprise with a mighty shout.

At that moment Margarete appeared on the threshold. She came noiselessly up to Chokhov. He could not see her face in the darkness, but her whole being, her dress fluttering in the wind, her disordered hair conveyed her anguish.

"Don't be afraid," he said to her in a voice that trembled slightly. "We shall come back."

The Czech whispered a translation to her at once. She seemed not to hear. She stretched her hand out to the Captain.

Embarrassed, he gave the order:

"Forward march!"

The small column vanished through the gates. The rain hammered down on to the cobbled courtyard. The Sergeant-Major stood holding the horse by the bridle. And suddenly, heedless of the people and her comrades all around, Margarete flew towards Chokhov, kissed him and, searching her memory desperately for the unfamiliar words, at last said:

"I lof yoo."

The Captain, taken aback, said nothing and jumped swiftly into the saddle. Soon he was swallowed up in the darkness, but the clatter of his horse's hoofs could be heard for a long time in the stillness of the night.

XII

Late in the evening General Sereda drove out to meet his division on the road. He wanted to see it for himself before the battle. He always did that on the march. It gave him immense pleasure to see his men not as little red circles and arrows on the map but as living people, marching, talking and smoking makhorka.

He thought it useful, both for himself and for his soldiers. The order of the march, respect for the rules about drinking, the conduct of the soldiers and simply the expressions of their faces—to him, an old soldier, all this seemed very important. In the rhythm of the march he sensed the rhythm of the coming battle and the division's readiness for it.

The soldiers, too, had grown used to meeting their General somewhere on the road during the march. He would bustle about in the ranks, exchanging a joke with the soldiers and sometimes reprimanding someone severely. They liked his simple manners, tall erect figure and fatherly tone. They felt his love and concern for them. Perhaps they forgot about him as soon as they passed, yet he always had a place in their hearts. They had faith in his combat experience.

The division did not expect to see him on this dark rainy night. And in fact, the General was doubtful about going, the more so because he felt unwell.

But at the last minute he decided to go. Realizing that severe battles lay ahead, he was worried. He

considered that soldiers and officers had got too used to the idea of the Germans being certain to lose the war, that it was a long time since they had been in any serious battles and that they might therefore be caught off balance at first.

"The Americans, they are the ones who are having a party not a war!" Taras Petrovich shook his head gloomily. "On the western front the Germans aren't fighting seriously, entire divisions are surrendering, handing over the keys of the towns.... At that rate it won't be long before they make Eisenhower into a Napoleon!... It's clear enough whom Hitler fears more! Well, anyhow, we know our cause is right—if we must, we'll fight!"

The General knew that the battle would be hard. Although he was only in command of a division and was not acquainted with the situation on the whole front, he guessed how advantageous it would be for the Germans to strike from north to south at the extended Soviet lines of communication. Apparently his division, like a number of others, had been assigned to eliminate this danger.

Some of the people at Divisional Headquarters were sorry the division had been sent north and not in the direction of Berlin. The General, an old serviceman, pretended it was all the same to him: they had to fight and it was for the superiors to decide where!

The General, accompanied by Lieutenant-Colonel Sizykh, drove out at 23.00 hours.

Half an hour later he was joined by Plotnikov, who had sent the Political Department men into the regiments to raise the offensive spirit. He knew about the General's doubts and was worried himself.

The Divisional Commander and the Political Department Chief parked their cars under an old tree at the junction of three main roads and stood side by side, for the thousandth time during the war.

The troops moved in dark columns along the wet asphalt of the road. Catching sight of the chiefs, the officers marching or riding on horseback in front of their units, looked round alertly and shouted back along the line:

"Brace up, lads, the General's meeting us."

And raising their hands to their caps, they reported as they went past:

"Fifth Company following the route . . . reporting. . . ."

"Second machine-gun company following the appointed route . . . reporting. . . ."

"Anti-tank rifle company following . . . reporting. . . ."

The names and ranks were lost in the night, in the rain, in the rattle of carts, in the uneven stamping of feet and hoofs.

As for the commanders of the regiments, they jumped off their horses, reported to the General and stayed with him until their units had passed. The horses, guarded by orderlies, jingled their bridles loudly in the darkness. When his unit had passed, the commander of the regiment would leap into the wet saddle and disappear into the darkness, to catch up with his vanguard.

The General talked loudly and with emphatic cheerfulness, addressing the officers riding past:

"Well, how are you getting on? Everything all right?"

He would go up to the soldiers, asking:

"Feet sore? How's your sub-machine gun? Does it fire? Why don't you cover up the machine guns? And tighten up your belt. You aren't out on a spree, you know, you are going to fight."

Noticing that the night and rain were depressing the soldiers, the General asked:

"Why don't you smoke? It's not '41 when we were still afraid of the Germans. Times are different now. . . ."

The soldiers lighted up with pleasure and the column went along, glowing with the red tips of cigarettes.

As more and more of the division went past, the General's face cleared.

"Veterans!" he said stepping back to the side of the road, where Plotnikov and Sizykh were standing. "It's a great army! You can close your Political Department, Pavel Ivanovich!... They know everything themselves. They are marching along as if they were going to work. It's the Stalin army, dear comrade!"

At last the artillery regiment went thundering by. Antonyuk arrived in a mud-spattered car, after a visit to the divisions of the first echelon to collect information about the enemy. The General ordered him to follow behind and drove to the village which he had marked down for headquarters.

The cars soon caught up with the division's column. Again the General and Plotnikov caught glimpses of familiar faces going by in the darkness, the black moustache of the sapper noted earlier, the barrel of a badly mounted machine gun, the white horse of a battalion commander, Chetverikov's Kuban fur cap.

Plotnikov decided to stay with one of the regiments, but the Divisional Commander overtook the division and soon, after turning off the main road, drove into the village. Like other German villages it was decked in white flags, which now hung down dismally in the rain.

The billeting men had already placed boards along the roads bearing the conventional sign "S" (the initial letter of the Divisional Commander's name). A sentry was standing outside the house reserved for the General. Signallers were dragging wires along, squelching over the wet earth in their big boots.

Inside the house at a table Lieutenant Nikolsky and two signallers were busy fixing up the telephone. A wireless operator was tuning in a transmitter.

"Make your report," the General ordered Antonyuk and sat down at the table, not taking off his *papakha* and listening alertly to the distant thunder of artillery.

While Antonyuk was taking a map from his case, the General asked Nikolsky:

"Who is connected to this telephone so far?"

"There is no telephone connection with the regiments as they are still on the march," said Nikolsky, saluting.

"I know that," the General grinned. "Who *is* connected?"

"Corps Headquarters, rear Headquarters, and the Medical Battalion."

"The regiments are receiving," reported the wireless operator, who had just tuned in the transmitter.

Antonyuk reported that in the region Naugart, Stargard and lake Madü-See the Germans had concentrated the First Marine Division, the Divisional Group "Denecke," the S.S. Divisions "Langemark" and "Nordland" and tank units of unknown designation. The Germans were attacking with large forces of tanks and infantry.

The General noted down the reconnaissance information on a map and summoned the commanders of the anti-tank units and self-propelled artillery regiment attached to him. They soon assembled. The General kept on delaying the opening of the meeting because he was expecting Plotnikov, who had a lot to speak to the commanders about. But Plotnikov still did not come, although he should have been there long ago.

Then the General decided to open the meeting without him. He assigned the artillerymen to their firing positions and instructed them to reconnoitre in the morning. Meanwhile reports came in by radio about the progress of the march. One of the regiments had already reached its sector, the others were approaching theirs.

The commanders took their leave and drove off.

Plotnikov arrived late at night, pale, distraught and very upset. He ordered everybody, including the wireless operator and the orderly, to leave the room. His voice was unusually sharp.

When he was left alone with the Divisional Commander he said:

"Put your coat on, Taras Petrovich. We'll go and see what our men have done. I never thought we should live to see a thing like this, Taras Petrovich."

The General knew Plotnikov too well to doubt the importance of whatever it was that had happened. Without asking questions, he put on his greatcoat and they drove off.

In one of the villages about ten kilometres away from Divisional Headquarters, Plotnikov ordered the car to stop. It was a big village with a pond in the middle. On the edge of the pond several men stood smoking.

At the sight of the car they threw their cigarettes into the pond and walked up to the General. They were the division's counterintelligence officers.

The General followed them silently.

In a long, one-storied house, over the roof of which hung a drooping white flag, lay dead Germans. A whole family of six people. They had all been slaughtered in a most brutal manner. Near them, a Red Army type cap was lying in the blood.

The counterintelligence officers reported the following:

In the evening three Soviet soldiers had entered this house, belonging to a peasant, Hans Krüger. They were drunk, noisy and swearing.

"Were they the only soldiers in the village?" asked the General.

No, in the next house a section of army signallers was stationed. The commander of the section, Sergeant Vladykin, had personally seen the three soldiers. Indig-

nant at their disgraceful conduct he had gone into the house and suggested that they carry on a little quieter.

Then, after posting a sentry, the signallers had gone to bed. At midnight soldier Ibragimov, standing on guard, heard piercing screams and shouts in the next house. He wakened Sergeant Vladykin. When they ran into the house the soldiers were no longer there but these Germans lay murdered.

A search was going on for the criminals. All units had been informed. A close investigation was being carried out.

"Who would believe it!" said Plotnikov. "Our soldiers!... Murdering children!... Who would believe it!..." he repeated, shaking his head.

The General maintained a depressed silence. On the way back neither said a word to each other.

Early in the morning, when the regiments had already gone into action, the General before leaving for his O.P. received a ciphered telegram over Sizokrylov's signature.

The General shot a glance at Plotnikov and with a slight qualm, took the message.

To the surprise of them both they received no reprimand. In general the message was rather strange. It gave an account of the case of the murdered German family and instructed all divisional commanders to guard their rear areas thoroughly, taking into account the fact that among the huge masses of people moving along the roads in the rear of our troops there might be Hitlerite war criminals and various suspicious characters.

It must be confessed that Taras Petrovich did not at once catch the connection between this instruction and the murder of the German family.

But there was a connection.

With one of the groups about which Sizokrylov had warned his counterintelligence officers and the commanders of his divisions, roamed Konrad Winckel.

With him were German families who had once taken over the land and houses of deported Poles. There were also inhabitants of Pomerania who had already been shifted from their homes at the order of the Hitlerite authorities. They drifted along slowly, like leaves driven by the wind. Not knowing where to stay or what to do, they went on like machines, putting into the uniform motion of their legs all the energy they had left. Walking seemed to have become the one and only concern of their lives.

Some of them were trudging westwards because somewhere there they had relatives and friends. Others were fleeing from the vengeance of the Poles who were returning to the land that had been theirs from time immemorial. Yet others were fleeing because everyone else was fleeing, and they were afraid to stay behind alone. And a few went just because no one had ordered them to stay.

On their way they met groups of Germans, evacuated at Hitler's orders but then overtaken by Russian troops and now returning to their homes.

It was a kind of tragic whirlpool of different fates, ruined hopes and belated repentance.

Among the families, the old men, the old women, the children who had lost their parents and the parents who had lost their children, there were quite a few soldiers who had changed into civilian clothes. They were there not at all because they wanted to break through to their own side and dreamed of taking up the arms they had so readily abandoned. They wanted to be nearer to their homes when the end of the war came.

All these people in small groups, moving mainly at

nighttime, avoiding meetings with Russian units or with people liberated from the German yoke, trudged slowly westwards. Sometimes they came across each other in the darkness, stopped in fright and, by their mutual fear, realized that they had met their own people. Then they would draw closer together, converse in low tones and ask each other:

"Where from?"

"Where are you going?"

"Is the road safe?"

"What's the news?"

"You haven't a doctor with you?"

"What for?"

"A child's fallen ill."

"In Woldenberg there's a Russian hospital. Call in there."

"To the Russians?"

"Yes.... I took mine there."

"And they?..."

"Yes.... Treated him...."

"The Russians?"

"Yes."

Then they would go their separate ways. The people walked along in silence, burdened with sad thoughts, but aloud they used only the most essential words—about the way, boots, food. Only one tall old man muttered now and then:

"The punishment of God!... For arrogance!... For shedding blood!..."

Winckel was making for Landsberg, for his second contact point, a flat indicated to him by Böhm. The first had been in Schneidemühl but that town had been besieged by Soviet troops.

Winckel was going to Landsberg not because he was longing to continue his spying activities. He simply wanted to meet just one of his acquaintances and get

some news. Or perhaps it was simply because a man cannot live without any aim, and the flat in Landsberg resembled a kind of aim.

It was not more than a month since Colonel Böhm had given him the addresses of his contacts, but to Winckel it seemed that many years, even centuries, had passed since then. The Winckel who had stood at attention listening to his chief had been quite a different man.

Now, walking towards Landsberg, he was afraid they might force him to do something again.

He did not want to do anything *for them*. After all, he was not a German subject but a citizen of the free city of Danzig, which had its own constitution and international status. Winckel no longer recognized the annexation of Danzig by Germany!

What a quiet contented life it had been in his native town before the Nazis had come to power! Winckel had worked as a customs official at the docks. Then, he had not been too satisfied with his job, but now he remembered the yellow labels on the bales with a feeling of great affection.

So he went along with a white band on his sleeve—a sign of his peaceful intentions—among other Germans with the same white bands on their sleeves.

They usually walked until dawn. In the morning the group would disperse. Each family would establish itself beneath its own tree, fuss about, cook food, eat, talk in low tones. The children would go away into a nearby village and, as a rule, return with bread, fat, tinned food: the Russian soldiers were not mean and they gave to the children willingly.

The old men also went into the village to beg for tobacco and then began to gasp and cough as they enjoyed the strongest Russian makhorka.

The younger lads and the heads of the families would roam about the forest in search of "game." Sheep and

cows astray in the forest were known as game. They were caught, stabbed with knives, skinned, and then the meat was roasted on a campfire, arousing the deepest envy of those who had not been so lucky. Children and old men would wander after the "hunters" and throw themselves on what was left of the carcass, tear at everything, even the bones and then, chattering excitedly, make themselves breakfasts on their own tiny campfires.

They only *walked* together, everything else they did separately. They did not share food. Each one thought only of his *own* future. In the general misfortune no one wished to trouble about his neighbour.

In the evening they would again assemble in a group, discuss the route to be taken and move on further. An ex-corporal, born in Landsberg, knew the neighbourhood well. He was leading the group.

As on previous nights, they went by the forests because the roads were full of Russian troops and, what was more, crowds of foreigners. The German fugitives feared foreigners far more than Russian soldiers.

A misty moon was shining. Their feet crunched softly on the damp-soaked pine needles. They pushed on past tar works, abandoned sawmills, hunting cabins. Soon afterwards they skirted a big lake. At dawn they suddenly came to the end of the forest. Before the fugitives loomed a big village with factory chimneys on its southern outskirts.

They stopped. For some time they looked out from behind the trees at the empty village. Then they sat about under the fir trees, wandered through the forest, ate, slept, sighed, went after "game." In the evening they moved on further.

As they cut across the main road, south of the village of Wugarten, the Germans heard laughter and talking. Under the trees, at the side of the road, some people were camping for the night, like gypsies.

A merry voice called out to the Germans:

"Quel pays passe par là?"*

Not receiving an answer a young French woman, who stood leaning against a tree with a cigarette in her mouth, began to peer at the dim outlines of human figures and suddenly, spitting out the cigarette, said in German with an expression of utter disgust:

"O-oh! Das dritte Reich!..."** And a minute later shouted out: "Heil Schicklgruber!"

Somebody whistled deafeningly. To the accompaniment of this whistle the Germans hurriedly crossed the road, walked along a ploughed field and quickening their pace still more, took cover in a wood. They could still hear someone behind them intoning with comic solemnity:

"Also entrann Zaratustra!"***

"God's punishment," muttered the tall old man beside Winckel.

In Landsberg Winckel left the others and set out to find his contact point.

With some difficulty he found the three-storied house he was looking for. Canopied by a huge white sheet on a long flagpole, the house stood wrapped in silent darkness.

Winckel opened the front door and listened, then went up to the second floor. It was very dark. He struck a match and immediately noticed a neat white board:

KARL WERNER, DENTIST

Winckel pressed the door bell. It did not work. Winckel knocked. No one answered. Winckel pushed the

* What country is passing here?

** The third reich. Schicklgruber—Hitler's real name.

*** Thus scrambled Zarathustra.

door. It was not locked. Winckel walked in and struck another match. Everything in the flat was turned upside down. On the floor lay scattered belongings and broken crockery. The glint of nickel plating came from a dentist's chair.

Winckel pushed ajar the door into the next room and started back in fright. Something there had moved. It was big and silent. After a minute of tense waiting Winckel decided to look into the room again. With trembling hands he lit a match.

In the far corner lay a huge St. Bernard dog. It moved but did not stand up, only breathed heavily. The old dog was dying.

Winckel left the room quickly, shut the door behind him and walked out of the flat, back on to the staircase landing. He was about to leave the house for good, when he suddenly heard a woman's voice in the darkness:

"Were you looking for Herr Werner?"

"Yes," said Winckel.

"Are you a relative of his?"

"A relative of his wife."

"Is your name Karl Wiesner?"

"No."

"Are you from Silesia?"

"No."

Having put these questions, the woman who had spoken struck a match, looked Winckel over until the match burnt out, and then said:

"Come in."

Winckel went into the flat opposite Werner's. The woman, who was old and had untidy grey hair, moved a chair towards him and herself went behind a screen, where she began to prepare something by the light of an oil lamp.

"So you are a relation of Frau Hilde Werner?" she asked from behind the screen and, without waiting for

an answer, went on: "So, if you meet Frau Hilde sometime, give her Frau Kleinerding's regards. She knows me, we are neighbours, bless my soul. And tell her that Herr Werner left on Friday, the day before the Russians arrived. He left at night. And tell her as well, that he wanted to leave the flat under my care, but I have enough worries of my own and I refused him outright. Outright. Tell her that. And if she comes back sometime and finds some of her belongings with Frau Müller and Frau Zelwitz from the first floor, and her stockings on the bandy legs of Frau Lenz from the third floor, she need not blame me.... I am not obliged to look after other people's belongings at a time like this. That's what I have to tell Frau Hilde. As far as I know, she has been evacuated to Stettin...." The old woman walked out from behind the screen with the oil lamp in her hands, put it on the table, began to wipe some plates with a towel and asked:

"And where are you heading for?"

"I don't know," said Winckel.

The old woman clattered the plates loudly and said with sudden anger:

"You don't know?! First set the whole world against us, destroyed everything and then 'I don't know!' ... My God, look what they have done! The youth smashed up in the war, towns ruined!... If I came across one of those bosses of yours, I would hand him over to the Russians straightaway!... I wouldn't pity him however miserable he looked," she finished with a keen look at Winckel.

"I am not a Nazi," mumbled Winckel.

The old woman curled her lips sardonically and said:

"Nobody's a Nazi now! There's Herr Werner before he ran away came to me—all about his flat—he also said: 'I am not a Nazi'... The Russians weren't even in the town then and he had already stopped being a Nazi.

'I was compelled,' he said to me.... And there still weren't any Russians even. He wanted me to look after his dog too.... She wasn't a Nazi, that's true ... but there was nothing to feed her on.'

It was growing light. The dawn filtered in through the paper black-out blind. The old woman put out the lamp and raised the blind. A grey, rainy morning peered dismally into the room.

Winckel said:

"Can't I sleep in your place, Frau Kleinerding, until evening? In the evening I'll go away...."

"Sleep, sleep!" the old woman began to grumble fiercely. "I wish I could go to sleep for ever and not see all this!..." With a sharp movement she threw open the door into the next room and said: "You can sleep there. Only, if you don't mind, don't use the bed!... Probably haven't had a wash all the way from Stalingrad."

Winckel lay down on the floor but, in spite of his tiredness, it was a long time before he could fall asleep. He kept on imagining that the old woman was already on her way to the Russian commandant to give him away.

XIV

In the evening Winckel left Frau Kleinerding's flat and went out into the street. Russian troops were passing through the town. It was pouring rain but the air was quite warm and smelt of spring. Winckel walked along slowly, keeping in the shadow of the houses.

He soon found himself outside town. Somewhere, to the right and to the left, on nearby roads, vehicles were clattering along and the uneven tramp of feet could be heard.

Winckel hurried to gain the cover of a forest, visible not far away. When he reached the trees he walked more

slowly. In a hollow he heard quiet voices. If they were talking in a whisper it meant they were talking German. There was in fact a group of German men and women resting there. At the sound of Winckel's footsteps they stopped talking altogether. Then, by the white spot on his sleeve and his cautious, timid manner, they realized that he too was a German.

On learning that Winckel had come from Landsberg they began to ask him what was going on there. Had he met any groups of foreigners? Was the town badly damaged?

After answering them Winckel in his turn made inquiries: were any people here going to Königsberg in Neumark? No, there weren't, but there were people going to Soldin and Bad Schönfliess, and that was right on the road to Königsberg.

"Is it far to Königsberg?" asked Winckel.

"Seventy kilometres."

"Are the Russians there already or...."

"They are. There are Russians everywhere...."

"And are ours far away?"

"Ours?"

"The army?..."

"Yes, ours. The army."

"Far away...."

"Very far away."

Winckel joined the people going in his direction.

One woman cried all the way. She walked behind, whimpering softly.

They tramped, as usual, until morning.

At dawn they dispersed about the district, ate and slept.

Winckel pulled a piece of bread out of his pocket and munched it sitting under a tree. The weather was damp but warm. There was a German sitting under the next tree, also munching something. It grew lighter and

lighter. Winckel went to sleep, then woke up, and again went to sleep, then woke up again.

The German under the next tree still slept.

Winckel's eyes roamed aimlessly over the forest, over the smooth paths, over the trees. The trees had a strong resinous smell. Finally he looked at his sleeping neighbour; the man's face—long, hairless, pimpled—seemed familiar.

Winckel's neighbour was dressed in a dirty old overcoat. He was clutching a stick with a bone handle. On his feet he wore tattered boots. With one hand he kept a tight hold on his rucksack.

"Hauss!" Winckel recognized him with joy and astonishment.

Winckel crept up to him, looked at him closely and shouted confidently:

"Hauss!"

Hauss woke up, looked fearfully at Winckel but did not recognize him. Winckel smiled—for the first time in five weeks. "Hauss," he said, "hallo, Hauss! It's me, Hauss. I'm Winckel...."

Hauss gasped. They embraced each other, then sat down side by side and Winckel hurriedly recounted his misfortunes. He was talking frankly, absolutely frankly, not like that time when he had been with Hanne.

"Everything's gone to the devil, that's a fact," he said finally. "It's the end of everything. You've got to save your own skin now."

"Sh!..." said Hauss, looking round. "Quiet!..."

"What's there to be afraid of?" retorted Winckel. "Dammit all!" But he said this in a quieter tone.

"Quiet!" repeated Hauss. "Shut up!" He moved over to Winckel: "You had better keep such ideas to yourself, or else.... Where are you coming from?"

"From Landsberg. Called in at Werner's."

"He pushed off long ago."

"That's what they told me. And what about you?"

Hauss grinned:

"I still serve the fatherland.... We've got a new leader here. Perhaps you have heard of him?" Hauss's voice dropped still lower. "Fritz Bürke... an SS man, Sturmbannführer." He was silent for a moment, then began to recount everything that had happened to him in the past month. "I only stayed two days in Gniezno, just managed to get away, one of the neighbours, a German incidentally, informed the Soviet Command of my presence. On the road I pretended to be a Czech born in Sudetes.... Even hooked on to a bunch of Czechs and wanted to get through with them, but got myself drunk and let out the devil knows what and barely escaped with my life. And in Breitensteine this Bürke got hold of me. Now I'm running all over the place like a dog, bringing information about the Russians back to the chief.... That's how things are!..." He looked round and whispered right in Winckel's ear: "This Bürke—he's a dreadful type!... A murderer. Look out! Not a word about your attitude!..."

"But we'll go away," said Winckel. "We are officers of the armed forces, not SS men..."

Hauss shook his head:

"This Bürke—you know what.... He says that in the near future we shall make peace with the English and Americans and then strike with all our forces at the Russians.... They put great hope on that in Berlin."

They were silent. Then Winckel asked:

"And where's Kraft?"

"Kraft?" Hauss waved his hand. "Shot himself in Poznan."

Again they were silent.

"Have you any tobacco?" asked Hauss.

"No."

"He did the right thing," said Hauss, meaning Kraft. "I wanted to myself, but didn't have enough guts."

Hauss looked intently at Winckel.

"I wouldn't have recognized you. You've changed a lot. What are you going to do?"

"I don't know."

"Where were you making for?"

"To Königsberg in Neumark, to a contact address."

"The old contact addresses have all been done away with. Russian counterintelligence caught a lot of our fellows."

"What shall we do?"

"Won't you come to Solden with me?"

"To this Bürke fellow?"

"Where else is there to go?"

In the evening the Germans again assembled and went on further. Winckel submissively followed Hauss.

Towards dawn they reached Solden. Hauss led Winckel to the western outskirts of the town. They kept to the back yards. They clambered over low walls and fences. At last they found themselves in an empty side street, every house of which lay in ruins.

After looking round, Hauss darted through a basement window of one of the houses. Winckel followed him in silence. In the basement they came to a door, behind it there was another door, and soon they both found themselves in a long damp passage smelling of mildew and mice.

They walked a long way. At last they reached a square cellar. Everything reeked strongly of wine. Huge barrels were piled all round. On one of them an oil lamp was burning. Two men were sleeping on some straw on the floor. A third, adjusting the wick of the oil lamp, asked Hauss about something in a whisper. Hauss said soothingly:

"Yes, yes...."

They went on further, passed through another damp, dark passage and, opening a big iron door, entered another wine cellar, chock-full of barrels. Here it was light, a small electric lamp was burning, the flex of which rested on the barrels while the lamp itself hung down from one huge barrel and shone on the heads of those sitting at the table.

Hauss left Winckel at the door, went up to the table cluttered with mugs, bent over one of the people sitting there and whispered something.

The man with whom Hauss was talking was small and thin, with a sharp rat-like face. He said loudly:

"Winckel! Come here!"

Winckel walked forward. A second man sitting at the table seemed to be asleep, with his head on his hands. A big, uncouth head with a round bald patch reposed among the mugs.

"Sit down," said the man with the rat-like face.

Winckel sat down.

"Another officer from the Wehrmacht?" asked the head with the round bald patch suddenly.

"Yes," answered the man with the rat-like face.

"Oberleutnant Konrad Winckel," Winckel introduced himself.

The head lay on the table for another minute, then lifted. Small piercing eyes looked Winckel straight in the face. The head was planted on huge fleshy shoulders, there was hardly any neck.

After looking at Winckel for a minute the man suddenly burst into loud laughter.

"Ach!... Look at him, Max!" he shouted. "What a sight! Where did you get that scarf? Silk, I believe! A real Frau! Ho-ho-ho! Sit down at the table, Frau Winckel! Eat, drink and then to bed, ho-ho-ho!..."

This burst of merriment died away as suddenly as it had flared up.

"Sit down," he said sombrely, although Winckel was already sitting. "What? You feel bad? You do, do you," he answered himself and, after a pause, said: "We'll get to know each other. I am Fritz Bürke. Heard the name? And this is Max Diering, my assistant.... He'll go far, if the Russians don't stop him, ho-ho-ho!... Well Winckel, what will you do?"

Winckel mumbled something about having to report to his command.

"Command!" smirked Bürke. "What command? You'll come under my command.... Or perhaps it does not suit you as an officer of the Wehrmacht to come under the command of the SS? Both worked together, but let the SS swing for it, eh? Perhaps the Reichswehr suits you better? Such gentlemen as von Witzleben or Beck for instance, if you still remember them? Listen, these hands here," he placed on the table a pair of huge, red, hairy hands, covered with rings, "these hands filched Benito Mussolini from the English, under their very noses. Understand? That's Fritz Bürke for you! I was a killer in Paris with Stülpnagel, in Russia—with Koch. I was working with Strasser and Röhm too, if you remember them... Drink! What are you waiting for? There's enough wine here till victory!"

Winckel drank a mug of wine and his head started spinning. He looked fearfully from lowered eyes at the SS man. The latter poured him out another mugful. Winckel drank this too. He wanted to get drunk.

Bürke said after a pause:

"Don't be afraid, you won't come to any harm with me! The famous Parisian fortuneteller, Madame Rigou, told me I should die a general. And I've got a long way to go before I'm a general, so I'll have to keep on living still.... And now I've come here to work in the Russian rear, so to speak!... In the Russian rear, on German territory! Never thought it could be!... And what do I

see? I see the Germans have shit in their pants, that's what I see. . . . Where are the healthy forces of the nation? I don't see them. . . . It's as if we were in a foreign country. At every step we are afraid some Prussian will give us away. . . ." His eyes suddenly went bloodshot and filled with hatred, he went on: "And in this, so to speak, epoch they send me to work in the Russian rear. . . . A blood-letting business, if you please, Fritz Bürke! . . . We believe in you, Fritz Bürke! . . . It's just in your line. Well, we'll put up a fight! Fritz Bürke—for the dirty work of the National-Socialist idea. He's not a mollycoddle, not a diplomat, not an orator, but a worker. I'll kill them all! . . . And you, Winckel, I'll kill you too!" he stopped suddenly. "I am not a spit and polish officer of the Wehrmacht! I'll tear out your arms and put matches there instead, understand? . . . And take off your kerchief, you horse's arse! Quick! Shave him and stuff him full of the National-Socialist idea till he chokes! . . . Drink, Winckel!"

Winckel hurriedly took off the handkerchief, swallowed another mugful of wine and was thoroughly drunk. He felt he was beginning to get fonder and fonder of Bürke. . . .

"This is a man!" he mumbled, almost weeping with drunken affection. "D-d-decisivel R-r-real! . . ." He looked into the leaden eyes of the SS man with an expression of slavish devotion.

He saw everything round him now as through a fog. Diering vanished, then came back, went up to Bürke and whispered something in his ear. Bürke stood up and walked with uncertain steps towards the entrance of the cellar.

Hauss whispered to Winckel:

"That's what he's likel. . . ."

"G-g-g-ood," stuttered Winckel. "Wond-d-derfull. . . Will kill them all! . . ."

Suddenly he had a dreadful vision: from the open

door of the cellar, slowly coming towards him, was a Russian soldier! Winckel started back and shook his head, but the vision did not disappear. Winckel jumped up from his seat and began to retreat towards the barrels. The man in the Russian uniform glanced at Winckel, went up to the table, gulped down a mug of wine and said in pure German:

"I'm going to bed, chief. . . . It's time I had a sleep."

And he vanished quickly behind the barrels through a small door which Winckel had not noticed before.

"What's this?" mumbled Winckel.

"Shut up!" said Bürke quietly. "Get him to bed, the drunken sot!"

Hauss grasped the staggering Winckel, led him out of the room and with difficulty got him to lie down on the straw in a corner of the cellar.

"M-m-m, a real man!" babbled Winckel.

XV

Had Winckel dreamed he saw a Russian soldier in this den of SS spies or had he really been there?

When he awoke in the morning Winckel was inclined to think he had dreamed it. His head was splitting after the wine and, as he lay on the straw, Winckel could not define accurately which of his experiences the night before had been dream and which had been reality.

Huge barrels stood around him, through them filtered the weak, flickering light of a lamp.

Evidently the meeting with Hauss and the conversation with Bürke had been real. Now that he was sober, Winckel was no longer so enthusiastic about the SS man. I'll have to get down to it again, he thought. And if the Russians catch me with Bürke, then it will be more than a prisoner of war camp for me! . . .

Subdued voices came from behind the barrels:

"There's a big battle in the north."

"Yes, you can hear the artillery rumbling."

"Ours have thrown in a lot of tanks."

Someone asked in a whisper:

"Did you see... Peter?"

"Sh!" another interrupted him.

Then they began to whisper so quietly that Winckel could not hear anything except for isolated words and the frequently repeated name "Peter." But Winckel was not even trying to overhear. His head was bursting. There was a smell of sour wine.

Footsteps sounded behind the barrels and Hauss's voice said:

"Winckel, where are you?"

Hauss appeared among the barrels, ready to leave. On his back hung a rucksack. Some motley shreds of cloth were sewn on to his overcoat.

"I shall be a Czech today," he said, pointing to the shreds of cloth. Winckel walked to the end of the passage with Hauss.

"What do you think I should do?" asked Winckel.

"You'll scout about, like I do.... Well, you were a fine sight yesterday!..."

"I'm not used to wine now." After a short silence Winckel asked: "What was that, did I dream it or?..."

Hauss interrupted him at once:

"All right, don't ask.... I don't know anything. Dirty business. A special job from Berlin.... So long."

They stood a little longer beside each other. They did not want to part. After all, they were old acquaintances—from that wonderful time, or so it seemed now, when they were both serving at Headquarters, and the army was on the Vistula and life still appeared to have some kind of meaning to it.

Winckel went back to the cellar. Soon he was called

to the table by Diering. He was given a fairly simple task to start with. Together with a certain Hinze, Winckel was to walk fifteen kilometres to Lippehne station, visit a railwayman there, remember everything he told him and return with this information.

"You will go in the evening," said Diering. "And mind you carry out the task accurately and come back in the morning. The chief gave orders to warn you not to think . . . of disappearing. . . . We have eyes everywhere, remember that."

In the evening Winckel left the cellar.

Hinze turned out to be a young lad of twenty-five. He had not been at the front: his father had somehow succeeded through his old friend, Julius Streicher, in saving his son from military service.

Until recently Hinze had worked as a "youth führer" in one of the districts in the province of Hannover. When the Volkssturm battalion was formed, he distinguished himself with such patriotic speeches, that one fine day, without any warning—so that he didn't even have time to tell his father—he was transferred here on specially secret work. That was a week before the coming of the Russian troops.

He had arrived together with Bürke and was considered one of the most reliable workers. However, he was dissatisfied with his work: it was very dangerous and, to tell the truth, almost pointless. He told Winckel this frankly. True, they were gaining important information here about concentrations and movements of Russian troops. But when it came to calling up aircraft, the aircraft did not come. . . . Dynamite was needed and there was no dynamite. They couldn't even supply us with tobacco . . . when did we smoke last. . . . In general, Berlin had made a fine mess of things! . . .

Hinze spoke of Bürke with respect and a trace of fear.

"If all Germans were like Fritz," said Hinze (he called

the SS man by his Christian name, wishing to show off to Winckel his familiarity with him), "it would not be too bad.... Kill somebody, stab him or beat him up—that's nothing for him!... He hits even Diering on the face," related Hinze with malice, rubbing his own cheek meanwhile. "He's an associate of Otto Skorzeny. The things he's had a hand in! The Führer himself, they say, knows him well; at one time Bürke was serving in his personal bodyguard. A great man!"

They walked on slowly over the soft, damp pine needles.

"Are there a lot of us here?" asked Winckel.

"A lot?! Probably about fifty agents altogether.... The others ran away where they could."

What a secret agent! thought Winckel contemptuously. Chatterer!

"Do you know Peter?" Winckel decided to ask.

Hinze whispered:

"Seen him once.... 'Peter' is a nickname. But who he is no one knows. He's a big bird, too.... It's a special group.... They know Russian and work disguised in Russian uniforms. I've heard a bit about them."

They made a bivouac. Hinze produced two flasks of wine. They ate and drank. Hinze said:

"They liquidated lone Russian soldiers lagging behind and...." Hinze put his mouth right up to Winckel's ear, "and not only Russians.... Only mind, don't tell anybody I've told you.... Yes, yes, believe it or not... German women and children...."

Winckel opened his eyes wide.

"Why?" he asked.

"Special task," said Hinze pompously, extremely pleased to have succeeded in shocking a professional spy. "Wonderful material for the Ministry of Propaganda.... You know, public opinion—it's an important thing...."

They went on. It was very quiet all round. Only far

to the north artillery rumbled and occasionally the long beams of searchlights swept the sky.

"Not far from here we fitted up a landing ground," said Hinze. "But the aircraft haven't come once. I can hardly wait till they get here.... Perhaps father will manage to get me transferred to other work. I am waiting for the order but it still doesn't come."

They soon approached the village of Lippehne, which was situated on a railway between two lakes. Winckel and Hinze made their way along in the shadow of the railway embankment. Trains loaded with artillery and tanks were standing on the rails. They must have been captured by the Russians on the way to the front. The weapons stood on the trucks not having fired a single shot. Russian sentries were pacing about near the trucks with sub-machine guns at the ready.

Hinze and Winckel stepped cautiously across the rails and walked towards a lake, visible not far off. On its bank, near a mill, stood a cottage. They went inside. The master of the house, a local inhabitant working on the railway, did not show them much hospitality and without even inviting them to sit down, at once shut the door firmly behind him and plunged straightaway into an account of his news: along the road to Pyritz so many Russian cars, so many tanks, so many infantry. The Russians had recently made an aerodrome nearby, there were no less than fifty planes there, twin-engined. Yesterday morning Russian soldiers had bathed in lake Wendelsee... Yes. In spite of the cold. The Russians were inspecting the railway. It was said they would get it working soon.

The explanation of their host's nervousness was soon forthcoming. When Hinze, sprawling on the divan, expressed a desire to rest for an hour or two, the man advised him to take himself off quickly because yesterday he had registered at the Soviet commandant's office as a member of the National-Socialist Party....

Hinze jumped up as if he had been stung.

"What did you do that for?" he asked.

"Order of the Soviet Command," his host said dismally. "I couldn't ignore it; the neighbours would inform, in any case."

Hinze and Winckel left the railwayman's house in a hurry.

They skirted one lake, then another and made through a wood in the direction of the village of Zollen. It turned out that Hinze had an assignment to visit this village. Probably Diering who was going somewhere on important business would be waiting for them there.

There was no one in the peasant's cottage on the eastern fringe of the village. The door was not locked and they went inside. Hinze gasped in surprise:

"Where have they all gone?"

They went out into the yard and were about to leave when the small door of a stone cellar in the yard opened, and there appeared none other than Fritz Bürke himself.

"Who's that?" he asked.

"It's us, Hinze and Winckel," answered Hinze timidly.

The owner of the cottage and his wife followed Bürke out of the cellar. They went silently past the spies and vanished into the house. Hinze and Winckel stood at attention waiting to hear what the "chief" would say to them. Bürke sat down heavily on a log lying near the cellar and croaked:

"This is it. We've been caught. I'm wounded in the arm. . . . What are you standing for?" he went on after a pause. "Sit down. Let's think what to do. Max is dead. Peter is dead. Lebe and four others have been caught. Someone gave us away. . . ."

Bürke stood up and staggered towards the cellar. Hinze and Winckel moved after him. In the cellar it was damp and stank of rotten cabbages. But the owners had tried to create some kind of comfort: in the corner stood

a small table and an armchair. A lamp was burning. Bürke's shadow swayed eerily on the vaulted roof.

"We've got to go away in a hurry," said Bürke. "The Russians probably know all our meeting places already."

They sat in silence. Bürke kept on examining his bandaged wrist.

"Bad," he said.

He was afraid of blood poisoning, gas gangrene. He was very nervous about his health.

This was no longer the former Bürke, and Winckel was quick to notice it. He kept fairly quiet, constantly mentioning Diering, of whom he had apparently been fond. He did not go into the details of the Russian capture of the wine cellars. Clearly someone had given them away or the Russians themselves had traced them. The shooting had gone on for half an hour. Bürke and two others had got away; they had made a dash for it but lost each other in the darkness. A radio station and important documents had fallen into Russian hands. They had to get out.

"Must have a doctor," said Bürke, "or poisoning might set in!"

Hinze stood up and said:

"Don't worry, chief, I'll go for a doctor."

"Where?" asked Bürke suspiciously, fixing his eyes intently on Hinze.

"In Lippehne, a man I know there is a surgeon's assistant, just near the station. I'll be quick. Only I'll leave the rucksack here as it'll be heavy to carry."

Hinze threw the rucksack off his shoulders, and this reassured Bürke.

Left alone with Winckel, Bürke sat still for a long time with closed eyes. After half an hour he opened his eyes and asked:

"Hasn't Hinze come?"

"No. It's early yet."

Bürke closed his eyes again. Winckel put the lamp out and lay down in a corner on the floor with his back on a pile of beet mangels. He soon dozed off. Bürke's voice wakened him, asking:

"Are you here, Winckel?"

"Yes."

"Hasn't Hinze come?"

"No."

Silence. Winckel again dozed off. After a time he began shaking with horror. A big, fleshy sweating hand was feeling his face. Winckel remembered that hand too well.

"What's up, chief?" he asked in a trembling voice.

"Isn't Hinze here?" asked Bürke.

"No."

"Why did you put the light out? Wanted to run away as well?"

"No, I was asleep."

Bürke's hand crept downwards, gripped Winckel by the lapels of his overcoat and lifted him lightly from the floor.

"Let's go," said Bürke. "Don't worry, you won't come to any harm with Bürke. If only infection doesn't set in! You don't know Bürke! But you'll get to know him. Diering's dead, you will be my friend. You're a good lad, Winckel. I promise you an Iron Cross, as soon as we get through. And we'll get through, don't worry. Do you hear that? Artillery! That's ours advancing! We're going to meet 'em...."

And Winckel went with Bürke. As they walked out of the village Winckel stopped, pulled his kerchief out of his pocket, wound it round his head and pulled on his hat.

"That'll be better," he mumbled.

Bürke did not say anything. They pushed deeper into the forest and went northwards where the artillery fire was roaring dully.

When it grew light they sat down to rest on the grass and suddenly saw Russian soldiers coming straight down the forest path towards them.

The Russians were carrying coils of wire, unwinding it and fixing it to the branches of trees. They were led by a young, slim, swarthy officer. Noticing the two men in civilian clothes sitting on the grass, he stopped.

Bürke stood up. He was very pale. But Winckel, who had experienced many things of which Bürke had no idea, walked boldly towards the Russians and said:

"Wladyslaw Walewski... and pan..." he nodded at Bürke, "pan Matuszewski... Polska, Polska.... Home.... To Warsaw...."

The Lieutenant nodded to them and went on. Bürke drew a deep breath. The colour slowly flowed back into his face.

"Smart lad, Winckel!" he grunted.

Noticing a deserted tar works in the distance they decided to stop there and wait.

"Ours will soon be here," said Bürke, lying down to sleep in the big wooden shed of the tar works. "Ours will break through. It's an important operation, Winckel, very important. A lot of tanks. The Führer hasn't shit his pants yet. Don't worry, Winckel!"

XVI

Lieutenant Nikolsky was in a great hurry, or he would have noticed the scared face of "pan Matuszewski."

He had to hurry. The division had only just gone into battle. In the forests and lake valleys crowded with the beautiful country homes of wealthy Stettin townsfolk, a fierce battle was developing.

There are no better informed people in the army than signallers. The mute and invisible witness of all

telephone and radio conversations, a signaller knows some of the most precious secrets of his unit.

Listening to telephone conversations Nikolsky noticed that hour by hour the situation was becoming more and more complicated.

That morning one regiment had reported an attack by forty German tanks; ten minutes later another regiment had reported that it was beating off an attack of sixty tanks and that its positions were being fired upon by six-barrelled German mortars. Oganessian was reporting to the Chief of Staff information given by fresh prisoners from the "Grossadmiral Denitz" First Marine Division. Air observation posts continually reported raids by enemy aircraft, mentioning in detail the number of aircraft and the types of enemy bombers.

The Chief of the Army's Reconnaissance Department, Colonel Malyshev, who had come down to the division, kept telephoning the regiments. The duty officers at Corps Headquarters and Army Headquarters were asking questions, giving orders and shouting till they were hoarse.

New call-signs were coming up more and more often—additional artillery units. Through kilometres of wire Nikolsky could hear the heavy breathing of the division as it fought the enemy, and through it all came the low, outwardly calm voice of the Divisional Commander. All headquarters, all relay stations, all the widely spread net of communications heard this voice. The listeners held their breath and hissed at restless people who wanted to go on with their conversation:

"Quiet, thirty-five is speaking!"

"Shut up, thirty-five's on the line!"

"Thirty-five calling!"

While Nikolsky in his dugout was listening to these conversations the earth's surface was shaking with the nearby explosions of shells and bombs. Soon communica-

tion failed with Chetverikov's regiment, which was in a difficult position.

The next moment Nikolsky was surprised to hear the Divisional Commander's voice directly addressing him.

"Nikolsky, why is there no connection with Chetverikov?"

"Break in the line, comrade thirty-five. I am sending signallers to the line."

"Go yourself and check up. I'm making you responsible for communication with Chetverikov."

Nikolsky and a group of signallers went out to the line.

It was a dark cloudy morning. The line ran over wet ploughed fields, then through a wood and finally along a main road. Everywhere spring floods were burbling and seething, and they often had to ford streams, wading up to the waist in water. Many streams and lakes were flooding the low-lying land.

The first relay point on the line was on the outskirts of a village in a white house with a tiled roof. Here, everything was in order. Contact existed with the Divisional Headquarters and the second relay point. A fat German woman served the signallers with coffee, complaining that it was not real coffee but acorn coffee. According to her, Germany began the war for the sake of real coffee: coffee grew in Africa, but they had taken away the Germans' colonies.

Nikolsky went on further to the second relay point.

Here, the line broke every hour, and the poor signallers were always running to repair it; they were nearly worn out.

German shells were falling on a flooded meadow, where we had established our artillery positions.

In the village there was an artillery headquarters. Everything was shaking from the firing of the guns sited

nearby. Frightened cows butted the gates and mooed loudly.

There was no third relay point. A German shell had fallen in the barn where this point was housed. Both signallers were wounded, and the wire had been flung into the wood. With great difficulty Nikolsky and his men managed to find the ends and join them together. They put the wounded on to a passing cart going to the rear for ammunition.

After leaving two of his signallers at the relay point and informing the signals company of the cause of the break in the line, Nikolsky went to Regimental Headquarters.

The regimental communications centre was situated in one of the cellars of a large house, among barrels and dusty bottles of old wine. Headquarters was in the next cellar.

When he picked up the receiver, Nikolsky immediately heard the Divisional Commander's voice:

"Take it easy! Take it easy! What do you mean the Germans have broken through? Restore the situation immediately! Counterattack at once!" After a silence the General asked: "Is 'Thunderclap' working already?"

"It is, comrade thirty-five," put in Nikolsky.

"Who's speaking?"

"Lieutenant Nikolsky."

"Where from?"

"From 'Thunderclap.'"

"Already there? Good lad! Get me Chetverikov."

The Divisional Commander's conversation with the commander of the regiment showed that the situation had become still more complicated. The Germans had brought more tanks into action.

On the "Seagull" sector they had succeeded in breaking through up to a distance of two kilometres.

After that the commander of "Pine,"—the battalion

of the anti-tank artillery regiment attached to Chetverikov—broke into the conversation:

"Excuse me, Comrade General. Commander of 'Pine' reporting. Have beaten off an attack by twelve tanks. Two tanks burning. Four of my guns out of action. I can see a big grouping of German tanks in Circle Grove."

"Hold out," said the General. "'Palm' is coming to you."

"At last!" retorted "Pine," apparently very anxious to see "Palm."

"Palm" was a self-propelled regiment.

The signallers drank and wetted their foreheads with wine from the barrels. From time to time the regimental Chief of Staff, Hero of the Soviet Union Major Migayev, came into the cellar, looking black and awful. They gave him a mug of Moselle wine and some makhorka—he had lost his own tobacco somewhere.

"Mind you don't get drunk!" he warned the signallers as he went away to his own cellar.

It occurred to Nikolsky that he could go back to the Divisional Headquarters, but it did not seem right to him to leave the front line just when the situation had taken such a sharp turn for the worse. But an hour later going back was out of the question: Chetverikov's regiment was completely surrounded.

Nikolsky went in to see Migayev. Chetverikov was there; he had just left his observation post. The Germans had approached the post and were already raking it with sub-machine guns.

The commander of the regiment was standing in the middle of the cellar, a big man with strong bandy legs, wearing a Kuban fur cap with a red top and carrying a riding whip in his hand.

"Have you got grenades?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Migayev.

"How many?"

"Twenty—hand, and five—anti-tank."

"Tell Shchukin to bring another hundred. Arm everybody with grenades. Free signallers, scouts, all drivers, code and map men—all will dig trenches round the house. Get moving. I am going to the Second Battalion."

Chetverikov struck his boot with his whip and went to the exit. The back of his neck was wet with sweat.

They brought in grenades. Migayev put two of the anti-tank grenades on the table next to him. Then he gave orders about the defence of Headquarters, and began to get in touch by telephone with "Violet," but "Violet" was silent.

"Break!" Migayev threw down the receiver and noticing Nikolsky standing aimlessly in the middle of the cellar with a grenade in his hand, said: "Lieutenant, all my officers are occupied somewhere. Go to the First Battalion, find out what's happening there and give them this order."

"What order?"

"What order?" replied Migayev. "The usual one. Stand till the last man. The old Stalingrad order. So that's that."

"May I leave my greatcoat with you?" asked Nikolsky. Migayev's eyes bulged, then he laughed:

"Of course, you may! Drop your greatcoat and run, you queer bird!"

Nikolsky was offended.

"Queer bird!" he muttered offendedly, as he strode towards the northeast, where the First Battalion was fighting. Why queer? I don't understand. He's a queer bird himself...

Some artillery officers were sitting in the ditch at the side of a main road lined with trees. They were looking through binoculars at the point where the railway line disappeared among low hills. Tanks were moving slowly

behind a low viaduct, throwing up showers of water from their tracks and rumbling over the rough going.

Are they really German? thought Nikolsky.

An artillery captain shouted hoarsely into a telephone receiver:

"Ready!"

As Nikolsky was going away he heard the command: "Fire!"—and deafening crashes following it. The tanks were German—shells began to burst round them.

The command post of the battalion was in a communication trench, running from the front-line trench towards a wood. Nikolsky jumped into it and at once saw Major Garin of the Political Department.

The Major was lying with closed eyes. Nikolsky asked worriedly:

"What's the matter with him, wounded?"

"No, just toppled over, went to sleep," answered someone.

Garin woke up, recognized Nikolsky, was delighted to see him and showered him with questions:

"How's the Divisional Commander? Does he know what's happening here? Have you seen Colonel Plotnikov? Is everything all right there? Any wounded or killed? Does corps know the situation?"

The Battalion Commander came up to him. He was a tall, gloomy, ungainly major called Veselchakov.

At the sight of him Garin, for some reason, became confused and coughed guiltily. As for Veselchakov, he did not look at the Political Department man. He listened to Nikolsky's report and said that a runner had been sent to Migayev with a message. And the line had already been repaired. And they would hold out.

Artillery fire opened up on the left. Nikolsky ducked down and Veselchakov said, throwing him a slightly contemptuous glance:

"That's our anti-tank regiment firing."

"One tank burning!" reported an observer from the trench.

Veselchakov raised his binoculars to his eyes, then grabbed the telephone receiver and shouted in an unexpectedly loud voice:

"Can't you see, tanks are coming again!" and he went up to the front-line trench shouting: "Anti-tank rifles, action!"

Nikolsky soon followed the Battalion Commander. Veselchakov was standing in a trench beside a rather short, young captain with grey eyes. They were both smoking.

"The German's using armour-piercing shells," said the Captain.

"Haven't they got splinter shells?" said Veselchakov thoughtfully.

Their calm voices, not even very hoarse, had a sobering effect on Nikolsky. It was calmer here than at Regimental Headquarters or Divisional Headquarters. And this calm resulted from the clarity of the situation—the Germans were visible. They were what they were, and no more: Germans with German tanks.

The Lieutenant had been fighting for only six months altogether, and was on the front line for the first time. He was amazed by the simplicity of everything there. In reality it was a smallish trench in which soldiers were sitting. One lay dying and was saying something with difficulty. The whole enormous machine of the army was at work on these soldiers: headquarters, artillery, engineers, supplies, radio and telephone. All this worked in order that these men sitting here in mudstained great-coats should go forward.

Nikolsky did not have long to reflect on this theme: German bombers appeared. The soldiers watched with a mixture of curiosity and self-interest to see where they would fly, hoping from the bottom of their hearts that they

would fly past. But no, it was their trench and their bodies that were the target of these forty-five roaring black Junkers. Sticks of anti-personnel bombs shrieked down and their hearts missed a beat in anticipation of pain and death.

Veselchakov and the Captain remained standing in the trench, grimly ignoring the bombardment and tactfully taking no notice of soldiers who threw themselves down. When the raid was over the Captain shouted in a ringing youthful voice: "Company, stand by!"

Major Garin appeared, pistol in hand.

Nikolsky remembered that he too had a pistol and pulled it out of his holster. He heard an oldish Senior Sergeant with a black moustache say aside to Major Garin:

"What are you here for, Comrade Major? Go to Regimental Headquarters, can't we manage without you?"

Nikolsky did not hear Garin's reply.

The soldiers opened fire. Their fire seemed to Nikolsky ragged and unconvincing. The Germans, however, were of a different opinion. Someone said they had stopped and lay down.

Captain Chokhov frowned at Nikolsky:

"Who uses a pistol at four hundred metres? Take the rifle from the wounded man there."

Nikolsky took the wounded man's rifle and standing at the breastworks began to fire. Every time he fired there welled up in him a feeling of unusual confidence in himself. He did not know whether his bullets were hitting the mark. But he knew, like all the others there, that he would fight to the death, as the men at Stalingrad had fought, not retreating a step.

It was what on the telephone and in Headquarters' documents was called: attacks beaten off with severe losses for the enemy.

The young captain standing next to Nikolsky lighted a cigarette and the match in his hand did not tremble.

"That's enough fire," he said. "The Germans have gone back. Can't you see?"

Nikolsky did not see. He did not see anything. He wanted to keep on firing and firing.

XVII

At first no one could understand how it was that the chief of the division's Political Department, Colonel Plotnikov, came to be here, in the front-line trench. He stood beside the soldiers for some time, looking through his binoculars at the Germans, then asked Chokhov:

"Well Captain, how are you getting on? Will we hold out?"

"We will," said Chokhov.

"Why so glum then?" laughed the Colonel. "If we shall hold out, you ought to be cheerful..." he looked through his binoculars again, then asked:

"Have the soldiers had breakfast?"

"Not yet," said Chokhov.

"Why not? Disgraceful! Where's your sergeant-major?"

A scared Godunov ran into the wood to the field kitchen.

"And bring back some vodka!" Plotnikov shouted after him.

He walked about among the soldiers, then ordered the trench to be deepened while it was still quiet. In the end it was Slivenko who asked:

"But how did you get here, Comrade Colonel?"

Plotnikov laughed.

"Made my way here, as you see!... What was there to do? Had to crawl!... And you aren't so tightly sur-

rounded really, that's just a manner of speaking: surrounded.... The Germans think they are surrounded not you...."

"You might have been captured by the Germans," remarked Slivenko reproachfully.

"I came here guarded by scouts."

Indeed, Captain Meshchersky and the division scouts were also here. Meshchersky greeted Chokhov then went up to the Colonel and said:

"Major Garin is here with the next company. And Nikolsky too, it seems."

"There're your reinforcements from the division," grinned the Colonel. "And you are complaining you haven't enough men!"

Garin also ran along the trench to the Colonel. He was extremely surprised and alarmed.

"What are you here for?" he exclaimed.

"All right, all right!" the Colonel suddenly grew angry. "Everybody wants to give me lessons and save my life! You chiefs would be better taking hold of shovels and helping the soldiers to deepen the trench quickly, before the German starts his music again...."

Chokhov, standing beside Meshchersky, said quietly:

"The Political Chief's got guts!"

"He's always like that," said Meshchersky.

When Meshchersky arrived Chokhov began to look at everything going on here—such ordinary things for the commander of a rifle company—from a point of view that was new to him. He'll go and write about it, thought Chokhov, and everything round him acquired a new, more intense, shade of colour; it had become a theme for future poetry. Chokhov's voice became still firmer, his commands—clearer and shorter. Chokhov even took note of his natural surroundings—the young grass growing over the parapet, the seething, flooded stream to the left of the position.

Meshchersky, however, had no time for poetry. He had forgotten about it. The Germans were again preparing to attack. The clatter of tanks hidden in Circle Grove grew louder and louder. Apparently reinforcements had arrived there.

Godunov and other sergeant-majors carried breakfast and vodka into the trench. Things brightened up. Pichugin even began to shout across at the Germans lying on the fringe of Circle Grove:

"Hände hoch—and come to us for Frühstück!"

The merriment did not last long. Again the battle began. Tanks, hidden in the wood, showered the trench with armour-piercing shells. Then German quick-firing guns opened up from somewhere behind the wood. The black figures of Germans again stood up and came forward. Behind them appeared a line of tanks, thirty-two of them. They drew level with the infantry, overtook them and advanced slowly, ponderously towards the trench.

Everyone froze to the spot. Irons dropped into mess-tins with a clatter.

"Who hasn't had his share?" shouted Godunov, holding a bottle of vodka over his head. A bullet whined past it.

It was Corporal Semiglav who had not drunk his share. But he was already at a light machine gun and did not feel like drinking. He gave the vodka to Pichugin, who gulped it down, smacked his lips, stood up and without hurrying, went over to his rifle which lay on the parapet.

What fine lads! thought Plotnikov sighing with relief.

"Well, boys," he said, "everybody's relying on the infantry!"

A shell shrieked towards them like an express train at full speed. Then the trench was enveloped in smoke.

A pale-faced runner, crouching low, brought in a box of cartridges and, stammering slightly, asked:

"Where's Colonel Plotnikov? The Divisional Commander wants him on the radio."

The Colonel bent down and went along the communication trench.

"Twenty-five receiving," said Plotnikov, poking his head into the damp earth by the transmitter.

"I could hardly find you," said the distant voice of the Divisional Commander in the earphones, with a clearly audible sigh of relief. "How are you getting on? Are the Lubentsovs with you?"

The General had got into the habit of calling the scouts "the Lubentsovs."

Plotnikov reported the situation. The General was silent, then hinted in a roundabout way that at midday the division would attack.

At that moment German aircraft again appeared.

"We are being bombed," said Plotnikov.

"I can see that," answered the General. "Hold out. We'll soon put that right. The enemy's falling back on Ivanov's sector. Find out how the 'trumpeters' are getting on with their 'cucumbers' over there."

Plotnikov went to the artillerymen to see if they had enough shells, and did not hear the Divisional Commander's final words. The General could not help adding:

"But why did you go there, Pavel Ivanovich!... You civilian!"

The communication trench was full of spring water. The artillery positions were in the forest behind the line, almost on the very fringe of it. Lorries were standing in a hollow. The guns had been dug into the earth and roughly covered with dead branches and green camouflage netting. Beside the guns lay heaps of empty shell cases. An acrid fog of powder fumes swirled all round.

Black, sweating and angry, the artillerymen were busy at their guns, now and then answering someone who

was sitting in a tree and giving firing adjustments, with a short:

"Yes!"

The Colonel leapt into the pit. The artillery officers came up to him at once:

"But you are wounded, Comrade Colonel," said one of them.

Plotnikov felt his cheek, it was moist. Apparently either a splinter or a hard lump of earth had grazed him. The wound was trifling. Nevertheless the artillerymen made him go into their dugout, smeared the scratch with iodine and covered it with a piece of cotton wool.

There was enough ammunition for the time being, but they had to husband it.

"Mind now," said Plotnikov, "everybody is relying on the artillery."

He went back along the communication trench. It grew quieter. The wounded man lying in the trench was still.

"He's dead," someone said and covered the face of the dead man with a cape.

Two captains stood at the parapet—Chokhov and Meshchersky.

"How's the Major of the Guards?" asked Chokhov. "Getting better?"

"Gradually. A pity he isn't here. With him you feel more certain of yourself. He guesses the enemy's plans very accurately."

Again enemy aircraft appeared.

"If we can only hold out till nightfall," said Chokhov.

Plotnikov looked at his watch and grinned: it was ten o'clock in the morning.

"You are wounded!" said Garin worriedly, noticing the blood on the Colonel's cheek but Plotnikov gave him such a look that the Major broke off abruptly.

Veselchakov told them that a general counterattack had been fixed for eleven o'clock. The minutes of waiting crawled slowly by.

At last came the familiar words:

"Forward, to the attack!"

The soldiers stood still for a moment. Why doesn't anybody climb out? thought Slivenko, and since everybody was thinking the same, no one climbed out. Bullets whistled viciously overhead.

Why doesn't anybody climb out? thought Slivenko again. Then he realized and even smiled to himself: it's *me* they are waiting for.

Gripping the parapet with an almost convulsive movement of his fingers, he leapt over the piled earth and went on. Not after him but rather at the same time as he, at that very second, everybody climbed out of the trench.

What did this mean? Either that every soldier thought at the same moment: it's me all the others are waiting for, or that one needs a certain amount of time to make oneself look death straight in the face, or, finally, that even without looking at the Senior Sergeant they felt that the Party organizer will go forward now. Anyhow all of them rushed out of the trench simultaneously.

A low groan came from the right. Someone fell as if poleaxed, but no one looked in that direction.

"For the Motherland, for Stalin!" cried Slivenko in a loud, hoarse voice.

The soldiers, breathing heavily, fell down and got up again. Their feet began to stick in muddy silt—that meant they had reached the stream. Then the water was up to the men's knees, to their belts.... To the right, on the fringe of the wood stood a big beautiful country house with a weathercock.

If I come out of this alive... thought Slivenko, but what he would do if he came out alive he just could not think. There was no time.

The moment shells began to burst on the fringe of Circle Grove ("Ours, ours!" Slivenko realized with joy), something changed, changed imperceptibly. It was even impossible to say where, perhaps in the atmosphere. It became easier to run forward, the shout of "hurrah" became louder and it brought a feeling of liberation from the oppressive heaviness.

What was the matter?

The Germans were not firing. Why—that Slivenko could not yet understand. Then he realized that the tanks now crawling in extended formation to the left of the viaduct were not German at all, but ours.

The mortarmen with boxes on their shoulders, dripping with sweat, caught up with the riflemen. To the right, the long barrels of anti-tank rifles swayed smoothly on shoulders of the anti-tank men. Finally, somewhere behind, engines whirled and the guns appeared out of the forest.

That hateful Circle Grove from which all evils had come, now became an ordinary, harmless wood. Sparrows flew about, there was deep shade from the pine trees. In the house with the weathercock Meshchersky captured two wounded German tankmen. They belonged to the Tank Division "Silesia," which had just arrived, only two hours ago, from the west.

Behind the wood nestled a smallish village and a sawmill. White flags were already fluttering on the houses. Two men came out to meet the soldiers—they were dark, with skin gleaming like a Negro's, but a little lighter. They were dressed in ragged khaki uniforms.

They walked ahead smiling broadly and shouting incomprehensible words, obviously expressing joy. After two minutes' conversation with Colonel Plotnikov, it turned out they were captured British soldiers, not English but Indians, who had escaped from a camp near Stettin. They asked to be given weapons so that they could go into battle with the Russians.

"We'll finish it ourselves now," smiled Plotnikov. "Have you far to go... Bombay? Calcutta?..."

"Bombay! Bombay!" said one delightedly.

"Lahore!" said the other.

The soldiers looked at the Indians with surprise.

Sergeant-Major Godunov put on a fine treat for the guests from afar. He certainly did not stint the vodka and they went off to the rear of the regiment staggering and smiling joyfully.

Meanwhile a new engagement had begun with the Germans, who had already recovered after the Russian attack. Over a new, freshly-dug trench bullets whistled again and artillery thundered. Breathing heavily the soldiers drank water from the streams and puddles, scooping it up in their caps. Chokhov looked at his watch: it was only one o'clock in the afternoon.

XVIII

Late at night on March 12, after our troops had stormed the fortress of Küstrin on the Oder and finally secured and consolidated the bridgehead on the west bank, General Sizokrylov asked Headquarters about the progress of the fighting on the lower reaches of the Oder.

The Chief of the Army's Reconnaissance Department, Colonel Malyshev, who had visited the divisions engaged in repelling the attacks of the German troops in the north, compiled a detailed report for the Military Council. From dispatches, from the information given by prisoners and from his personal observations the Colonel had succeeded in establishing a number of significant facts.

First, the German tanks and assault guns were firing armour-piercing shells. Firing at infantry with armour-piercing shells! Didn't that mean an acute shortage of

fragmentation shells? Further: the Germans were firing at ground targets with anti-aircraft guns; these guns had been taken from the Stettin and even Berlin regions' anti-aircraft defences. That meant that the Germans were short of field artillery. And finally: every single German artillery shell had been produced in 1945. That was an outstanding discovery: the shells were going straight from the factory to the front; therefore, stocks had been exhausted.

Although the Germans kept throwing fresh forces into the battle, they were having no success. True, a few of our divisions were in a difficult position. Losses were fairly great. However, all this was insignificant when compared with the general results of the fighting. The Germans' plan to break through in the rear of the troops of the First Byelorussian Front had been thwarted. Our units, counterattacking ceaselessly and wearing down the Germans' strength, were beginning to press the enemy and were slowly moving forward, enveloping in a semicircle the last German stronghold on the lower reaches of the Oder—Altdamm.

All these facts gave General Sizokrylov a feeling of certainty and calm.

Chokhov and his soldiers did not know the general situation. At the disposal of the Military Council were tens of thousands of lives. At the disposal of the soldiers—only their own lives. General Sizokrylov had detailed information from hundreds of sources. The soldiers only knew what they saw in front of them.

And before them they saw the German tanks with black and white crosses on them—just like those they had seen on the Don and at Novgorod and Sevastopol.

There were still plenty of tanks but the commander of the division, General Sereda, observing the Germans' movements, felt that the enemy was fighting the battle uncertainly and with a hesitancy sufficient to cause the

failure of any attack. At first the Germans had rushed in headlong heedless of their losses, but after a few days, on meeting stiff resistance, they had begun to tire. The Soviet regiments began to move slowly forward.

Reassured, Taras Petrovich drove away from the observation post to Headquarters. There he washed, took off his boots and even decided to have some sleep. But the Chief of the Political Department did not let him sleep. Plotnikov had just come back from the front line and was very surprised to see the General lying on his camp bed with a newspaper in his hand.

"What, are you going to sleep, Taras Petrovich?" asked the Colonel.

"Yes, must have forty winks. And I want to have a look at the paper too."

"How's that? On the front line...."

The General grinned and said maliciously:

"I've heard.... You joined in the attack.... A pity you are a colonel or we'd have to give you a soldier's Medal for Glory, third class. And why did you go there? Was the place empty without you? Do you want me to tell you why you went? From lack of faith in your own men!"

Plotnikov burst out laughing.

"And don't you go up to the front line yourself?"

"I do. When it's necessary."

"And who knows when it's necessary and when it's not necessary?"

Taras Petrovich winked cunningly:

"You've got to be able to feel that!" he said.

At that moment the left flank regiment called up the Divisional Commander on the radio. During the last twenty minutes serious changes had taken place on the left flank. The enemy had pushed back the adjacent regiment and attacked the rear of Ivanov's regiment. This regiment had organized perimeter defence and was with

difficulty repulsing the assaulting German tanks belonging to that same "Silesia" Tank Division.

Furthermore, the Germans had broken into the village where the Regimental Headquarters was situated. The Chief of Staff was speaking by radio in a house under fire from German sub-machine guns.

Taras Petrovich glanced sidelong at Plotnikov, buttoned up his tunic and began pulling on his boots. Then he picked up the telephone receiver and called up the commander of "Palm."

"Get your men ready for action and go yourself to Drozdov. I shall be there."

Putting down the receiver the General said:

"I'm going there."

"You feel that?" asked Plotnikov with a grin.

"I feel it," answered the General angrily.

He stepped into his car and drove out to the lake near which the reserve rifle battalion was stationed. The battalion was already on the alert. The soldiers were formed up on the shore of the lake. A robust young battalion commander without a greatcoat and with two Orders of the Red Banner on his broad chest met the General with a thunderous:

"Attenshunl..."

The General left his car, walked along the battalion's ranks looking keenly into the faces of the men, then said:

"Comrades, I am sending you into battle. I did not want to touch you: you are my reserve. But once I send you into battle that means it's necessary. And I ask you to fight as befits the Divisional Commander's reserve. Drive the Germans out of the two inhabited centres, restore the situation, help the neighbouring division whose position is not too good—in short, gain a victory. That is what I ask of you, and what I order you. You will not fight on foot, but go mounted on self-propelled guns."

The roar of an engine was heard. A car was approach-

ing across the meadow, spurting showers of water from under its wheels. The General turned towards it and waited. Finally it drove up, and a short brawny Colonel jumped out—it was the commander of the self-propelled artillery regiment. Going smartly up to the General he reported that the regiment was concentrated on the line of departure in a wood in the area of height 61.5 and ready to move.

"The battalion will be with you in an hour," said the General and turned to the soldiers.

When the Colonel had left, the Battalion Commander raised a big hand to his cap and roared:

"May I carry on?"

The Divisional Commander waved.

"Right turn!" ordered the Battalion Commander.

Heels struck the ground together.

"Why don't you wear a greatcoat?" the Divisional Commander asked the Battalion Commander. "You'll catch cold!"

"Never been ill since I was born, Comrade General!" shouted the Battalion Commander as loudly and smartly as if he were giving words of command, and then, addressing the soldiers, he ordered: "Forward march!"

The battalion marched past the General and soon disappeared round the bend in the road.

"Well, shall we go and sleep?" asked Plotnikov mockingly.

"All right, a joke's a joke," the General waved him aside; he stood for a minute listening to something, then got into the car.

When he returned to the O.P., the General ordered the Operations Department to arrange for a general offensive at 18.00, to synchronize with the attack of the battalion mounted on the self-propelled guns. Lieutenant-Colonel Sizykh received an order to organize twenty minutes' artillery barrage.

Plotnikov went to the Political Department, where he warned his men about the coming attack and sent them out to their regiments. Then the Colonel, dissatisfied at the sluggishness of the second echelon, decided to drive to the division's rear and organize the rapid delivery of ammunition which was now extremely important.

When he had left, the General stepped into his car and set off for the front line.

The car drove past the charred ruins of German villages. The General remembered the villages of Byelorussia razed to the ground. The Byelorussian Front was fighting on the Pomeranian Wall but it still remained the Byelorussian Front. This name should serve to remind the enemy what fate awaits invaders of the Soviet Union.

A strong, moist wind was blowing from the northwest and the General remembered that the sea was near. He turned to Lieutenant-Colonel Sizykh who was with him in the car, but the artilleryman had taken advantage of a quiet moment, and was fast asleep.

The General looked at his watch: it was 17.30. He glanced sideways at the driver: the latter stared fixedly ahead.

"A sea wind," said the Divisional Commander.

The driver nodded and answered briefly:

"The Baltic."

In the wood where the self-propelled artillery regiment was concentrated, it was quiet. The soldiers of the reserve battalion were eating, seated on the ground. Mingling among them were the gunners in blue overalls. The infantry were inviting them to share infantryman's *kasha** but the gunners refused.

"It's better to fight on an empty stomach," said one of them. "It makes you fiercer."

The scouts arrived with Meshchersky at their head.

* Porridge.

Then Colonel Krasikov came. He told the General that his neighbour on the right had advanced four kilometres forward and that the Corps Commander was demanding immediate action from Sereda.

The General looked at his watch: Twenty minutes to six.

The sappers assigned to accompany the self-propelled guns, arrived. Ivanov was asking for help on the radio. The General looked at his watch: It was ten minutes to six.

"Mount your vehicles!" sounded the command, and the S.P. gunners dashed towards their steel giants.

The infantrymen put their spoons into the sides of their boots and strapped their messkins on to their field bags.

"'Mignonette'! 'Mignonette'! 'Mignonette'!"—screamed a telephone operator somewhere behind the trees.

The General, standing on the edge of the wood, stared intently through his binoculars at the plain stretching before him and at the already green bushes lining the banks of the narrow stream on the left. Still further to the left he caught a glimpse of a town with two high church towers. Black smoke from fires swirled over the town.

The artillery roared and then the self-propelled guns rushed out of the wood loaded with soldiers. At first they followed one another along the road, but as they drew level with a brick works they fanned out and began to fire on the move. The signallers pulled wires along behind them, and soon the General and his staff walked away to the brick works, where Meshchersky and his scouts had gone to equip an observation post for him.

The General went up the stairs to the attic. A telescope had been fixed there. The artillery thundered ceaselessly. At last there was a hush in which only the angry coughing of the self-propelled guns and their dry, sharp

shots could be heard. But on the slopes to the right, men climbed out of the trenches and ran forward. The wind carried a scattered "hurrah" to the General's ears.

After thirty long minutes the first dispatches began to come in from the regiments. The self-propelled artillery regiment had forced the German front and come out in the rear of the enemy units. Ivanov's regiment had broken out of encirclement with the help of the self-propelled regiment, and captured three inhabited centres. The other regiments had also advanced successfully.

Artillerymen went past the O. P. dragging guns and humping ammunition boxes across the marsh, shouting and cursing.

The General drove on forward, and soon the Divisional Headquarters arrived at the brick works. Voronin who had captured a German officer brought him there to Oganessian. When the questioning was just about to begin, Colonel Plotnikov returned from rear Headquarters. He wanted to be present at the questioning and summoned Oganessian and the prisoner.

Korvettenkapitän Eberhardt, a naval officer, informed them that in Altdamm only a strong covering force remained on the bridgehead fortifications. The shattered divisions had retired on to the west bank. There they would reform and take up defensive positions.

"If they can," added the Korvettenkapitän, lowering his red eyelids and waiting for the next question.

He had lost his brother, who had been wounded in yesterday's fighting and had died in his arms. His brother had been a naval warrant officer. All of his family were sailors. The future of Germany is on the seas, the sailors had been told ever since Tirpitz. When they were turned into infantry, the Commander-in-Chief of Naval Forces, Grossadmiral Denitz himself, had visited them. That was in Altdamm three weeks ago. The future of Germany, said the Grossadmiral, making a speech before

the assembled division bearing his own name, is on this bit of land.

Angry tremors ran over the sailor's handsome face, from his ears to his chin.

"During the re-training," he said after a pause, "the infantry instructors continually quoted the example of the Russian sailors, who turned out to be excellent infantrymen in the battles at Sevastopol and Leningrad. . . . It was pretty tactless to remind us of the valour of the Russian naval infantry in these circumstances. Our sailors could not, or, possibly, did not have time to become real infantry. On March 1, the division numbered fourteen thousand men, now only pitiful remnants are left, not more than four thousand morally broken men. The division was a part of the 'Oder' Army Corps and this corps was a part of the 'Vistula' Army Group which was under the command of Reichsführer of the SS Himmler."

Oganesyan could not help noticing that the Korvettenkapitän spoke of his division and of the corps, and of the group and of Himmler in the past tense.

"There aren't any more rivers in Germany," said the Captain, "even to give the German corps their names. . . ." Then he muttered: "there is only one river left—the Lethe."

Oganesyan translated these words to Colonel Plotnikov.

The Colonel looked keenly at the pale face of the naval officer, and the German, noticing this thoughtful and, as it seemed to him, sympathetic look, suddenly said:

"Herr Colonel, take me on in your naval service. I am a specialist on the tactics of submarine warfare and have much experience. I'm sick of serving hysterical fools and adventure-seekers."

The Colonel grinned and replied:

"You won't have to serve them any more. But if any other such adventurers appear in the future, I advise you

to remember the lessons of these years and your own words now." He turned to Oganessian: "Ask the German if he will agree to make a speech through the loud-speaker to his comrades in arms."

Eberhardt agreed immediately.

At night they took him to the front line, which already passed among the houses of the town's suburbs. The voice of the Korvettenkapitän resounded loudly among the river warehouses and port buildings:

"I am Korvettenkapitän Eberhardt. Many of you know me. My father and my grandfather were German sailors before me and, I venture to say, I, too, am an honest German. And now, as an honest German, I call upon you to lay down your arms, not to shed your blood for Hitler. Shame and death to him! He has led our fatherland to ruin!"

When he had finished his speech the German stood as if he were petrified, then his shoulders began to shake, he turned abruptly and walked away, escorted by the silent scouts.

XIX

The soldiers marched on. Their boots were sodden. They were tired, sweating and angry. Along the sides of the roads lay yellow-painted guns, mangled bicycles, cars and huge diesel lorries.

At night Chokhov and his company forced their way into a small town on the bank of the Oder. Shattered German tanks stood on the empty streets, and abandoned anti-aircraft guns were mounted at the crossroads.

The arrival of the Russians was a surprise to the inhabitants. Only yesterday in the Stettin newspapers they had read of the success of the German offensive.

Lights were burning in the windows—the Stettin power station, it seemed, did not know either that this sector of the shore had already been captured by Soviet troops.

On the river, near the bank, a naval cutter was puffing in the darkness. Heavy boots were tramping the deck. A lantern flashed at its bows.

Chokhov took a light machine gun from Semiglav's shoulders, went down to the bank, unhurriedly mounted the gun near a newsstand and fired a long burst of tracer and armour-piercing bullets. Slivenko threw an anti-tank grenade on to the cutter. There was an explosion, the cutter burst into flames like a torch. Shouts and groans were heard.

The sound of the explosion and firing reached other craft and a gunboat lying in the middle of the river. Lights flashed in the distance over the glassy blackness, soon shots rang out across the water. The ships were firing into the town without aiming. Simultaneously rumbling explosions could be heard: long-range coastal artillery had opened fire from Stettin.

In spite of the firing the soldiers settled down to sleep but were immediately awakened. They had to move on, to cut the road joining Altdamm and the southern river crossing. The commander of the regiment, Chetverikov, walked down the street past the soldiers on his powerful, bandy legs, shouting:

"Why should I be ahead and you behind? Have I got to attack alone, eh?"

The soldiers jumped up and moved on. They marched and marched, again forgetting rest and sleep. Passing the houses they looked in at the windows with envy. Behind the windows stood big, double bedsteads with soft featherbeds on them.

"Never mind, lads," said Slivenko, "wait a bit and we'll soon have a sleep."

"I'll sleep for a month," said Gogoberidze. "A whole month! I'd give anything for a sleep in the mountains under a sheepskin coat!"

Now and then someone would contrive to fall asleep on the march and suddenly losing direction the sleeping soldier would march sideways like a somnambulist away from the others, until they called him back. Then he would wake up, shake his head, look round and hurry back to take his place among the others.

Near Altdamm the Germans again put up a stubborn defence. Coastal artillery from Stettin kept up a continuous fire. Machine guns fired from attics. The soldiers lay down and almost immediately went to sleep, all except the sentries detailed to stand guard.

While our artillery took up new positions, while the fire power of the division grew and expanded, the soldiers slept. Then Chetverikov appeared again, this time he was not alone, but with Colonel Krasikov.

"What are you stopping for? For-ward!" shouted Krasikov, and led the attack himself.

The soldiers got up and running from cover to cover, and mound to mound, broke through into the southern outskirts of the town. The last crossing from Altdamm to Stettin was defended by a German armoured train. It could be heard firing alone in the falling darkness.

On the streets stood German anti-aircraft guns. Chokhov ordered the soldiers to drag them up and turn their barrels in the direction of the firing. Dripping with sweat the soldiers turned them and pushed them forward. They fired them only three times in all, because there were no more shells.

Crawling forward with a grenade in his hand, Slivenko heard Pichugin's heavy breathing on his left.

"Tired, Pichugin?" asked Slivenko.

"Never mind, we'll last out," gasped Pichugin.

An obstinate German machine gun at the crossroads

did not give them a chance to move forward. They lay down. Then Slivenko missed Pichugin's heavy breathing next to him. He looked round. Pichugin was not there. Slivenko raised his eyes. On his left there was a big shop with smashed windows beneath a huge signboard.

Crawled in there to fill up his "old kit bag"! thought Slivenko angrily.

A self-propelled gun went slowly up the street, stopped at the crossroads and smashed shells at one of the houses round the corner. The German machine gun fell silent. Thunderous firing began.

"Hurra-a-ah!" echoed on all sides, like the sound of the wind.

Ahead a flame licked into the air. The German armoured train burned brightly over the black gulf of the river.

Slivenko dashed forward. It immediately grew quiet. Some German soldiers came out of a house, their hands raised.

Wiping the sweat from his forehead, Slivenko stopped and again thought of Pichugin.

"You haven't seen Pichugin?" he asked Gogoberidze.

But neither Gogoberidze nor anyone else had seen Pichugin. Slivenko said angrily:

"I know where he is.... I'll go for him now."

The soldiers no longer felt any need to stoop as they walked. The town gradually began to fill with troops.

Slivenko returned to the German shop into which Pichugin had disappeared. Yes, Pichugin was there. He was lying near the counter, huddled up, wounded. Slivenko dragged him out on to the street, bent over him and asked:

"Well, what's the matter with you?"

"Got me in the chest, the blighter," said Pichugin. "Just here," he groaned and forced out between his clenched teeth: "What are you looking at me like that for? I won't die! I'm not that kind. I'm Pichugin."

"How did it happen?"

"Came in here.... Just to have a look.... And there's a German, sub-machine gunner, the swine...."

A word of reproach was about to burst from Slivenko's lips but he kept silent, tore off Pichugin's pack and belt, unbuttoned his greatcoat and pulled up his tunic. A little blood was seeping from the wound. Slivenko tore open his own field dressing and placed the cool cotton wool on the wound.

"Wait a minute," he said, "I'll fetch a first-aid man."

The dark streets of the town were full of soldiers but there were no first-aid men among them.

"Any first-aid men here?" Slivenko asked every group of passing soldiers.

At last a medical orderly and stretcher bearers were found. They followed Slivenko.

Pichugin was lying face downwards. Turning him carefully over on to his back, Slivenko saw that he was dead. Pichugin's face, always grinning and sly in life, was sad and calm now.

The medical orderly and stretcher bearers went away.

Slivenko remained standing beside Pichugin. He was suddenly gripped by a feeling of immense and utter fatigue. The firing had ceased. An endless stream of excited men was going along the street to rest. Bright headlights flashed on Pichugin's face and Slivenko's broad, tired back.

Signallers were dragging wires over the streets and yards. From roofs, from kitchen gardens, or just from the pavement, news was being sent deeper and deeper into the rear, the news of the capture of Altdamm.

From now on, Hitler had not one soldier on the eastern bank of the Oder. The carefully thought-out offensive had collapsed and with it had collapsed the hopes of Bürke, Winckel, the old woman von Borkau and other

remnants of the old Germany left in the rear of our troops.

One of the cars stopped near Slivenko. Major Garin jumped out.

"Can you tell us which way the Regimental Headquarters has gone?"

Recognizing Slivenko he told him that very soon the Political Department would be calling a meeting of company Party organizers and he asked Slivenko to prepare a report on his own Party work. Noticing the still figure on the ground Garin paused, then asked, peering sympathetically into Pichugin's face:

"What? A friend?"

"Not exactly a friend," said Slivenko. "We fought together in the same company. I'm very sorry for him. Wanted a good life but couldn't cotton on to how to reach it. A lot of the old in him. Perhaps he himself suffered from it. He was a difficult man."

Garin drove off, but Slivenko still stood there. We must bury him, he thought.

After a hard search he found his company. The whole town was full of soldiers, guns and cars—ours and captured ones. A signaller he knew, from Battalion Headquarters, pointed out to him the whereabouts of his company: it was billeted in the fishing huts on the riverbank. Big nets were lying about there and everything reeked of fish.

A dark sky, lighted with the glow of occasional flares, hung over the black waters of the Oder, over the blown-up bridge, over the shadowy outlines of the warehouses.

The men were very tired, but no one was asleep yet. The excitement of the night attack had not yet subsided. The company had lost three men. Everybody was distressed by the news of Pichugin's death, although many had not been very fond of him because of his spiteful character.

"He wanted to ride to paradise on someone else's back," said Semiglav. "Individualist!..."

The Sergeant-Major said:

"Why remember the bad now!"

Gogoberidze said:

"Funny he was. Oh, what a funny fellow!... It'll be dull without him."

Slivenko, with a great effort of will, forced himself to rise.

"I'm going," he said. "I'll find out where they've buried him. Got to write to his family."

He went out of the hut and soon found himself on the streets of the town again. There were fewer cars and men about now: they had been sucked into the yards and houses.

The sky was full of lightning, whether from a storm or from gunfire it was difficult to say.

Slivenko was just in time. The carts of the division's burial squad were collecting the dead.

The commander of the burial squad, a forty-five-year old junior lieutenant with an imperial beard, was walking with a torch in his hand, searching out the dead men.

The soldiers, all non-combatant, slow, elderly men, did their work with enviable calm. Sometimes they smoked and the glowing ends of their huge makhorka cigarettes momentarily lighted a moustached or bearded face, which was neither cheerful nor sad.

At last two of them went up to Pichugin.

"What, is he a countryman of yours?" one of them asked Slivenko.

"Yes," answered Slivenko.

"Where from?"

Slivenko answered reluctantly:

"He's from Kaluga, I'm from the Donets Basin."

"Do you call that being a fellow countryman?" said one.

"We are all fellow countrymen abroad," put in the second man dourly.

The junior lieutenant with the imperial beard gave the order to move, and the carts trundled slowly along the main road. The dark figures of the soldiers of the burial squad glided along beside the carts.

"Very interesting it was," said someone, "what happened with a lieutenant at the station. I go up to him, take him by the feet—and on to my shoulders. Handsome lieutenant, very young. And he says: 'Is that you, Mum?' Alive, it turns out. First time, he says, he was in a real battle; he was on his way back—he's a signaller at Divisional Headquarters—and on the road the poor chap sat down and dropped off to sleep, like a dead man. Slept seven hours without a break. Perhaps they were looking for him somewhere and he was fast asleep. We nearly went and buried him alive."

"Dreaming about his ma," said another voice sentimentally. "Well, of course, still a boy, even if he was a lieutenant!"

"A lot of our fellows had it this time," said a third voice. "It was a hot fight."

"But all the same," said the man who had told the story of the supposedly killed lieutenant, "queer to be on German soil, eh?"

"That's true," said another voice. "Time we dropped our awful job."

"It's war work," said a voice indifferently.

It grew light. Silent figures appeared on the hill. This was the area assigned to the division's cemetery. On maps the area was known as height 49.2, three kilometres southeast of Altdamm. Dead soldiers, collected earlier, were lying here already, near them a heap of rifles and tommy guns and a pile of wooden obelisks with red stars on them. The hill lay near the main road. And this road led to Landsberg, Poznan, Warsaw, Brest, Minsk

and Moscow. And there was a road to Kaluga as well, along which the little erring soldier, Timofei Trofimovich Pichugin, had come and would not return.

Slivenko watched silently as they buried Pichugin. He had a depressed feeling of something unsaid, something or other that he ought to have proved to Pichugin and now could not.

XX

After the capture of Altdamm Krasikov set off to visit Tanya. In his field bag lay a letter to his wife which, if necessary, he was going to hand to Tanya herself. Semyon Semyonovich was quite certain that, after reading such a letter, Tanya, or any other woman for that matter, would agree to everything.

Krasikov was in a wonderful mood. The Altdamm operation had gone off brilliantly. There was talk that the corps would now be transferred to the Berlin front. Semyon Semyonovich was still excited over the night attack and even inclined to think that our units' breakthrough into the southern outskirts of Altdamm was almost entirely due to his personal intervention.

In the village where the Medical Battalion was quartered, only two houses remained standing. Not all the tents had been pitched yet: only the surgery tent was working. The wounded were lying and sitting outside, some on stretchers, some on the bare ground. The badly wounded were quartered in the two houses.

Krasikov spoke to some of the soldiers. He spoke to them in a language common to certain senior officers, that is to say, in a language extremely poor both in words and ideas. The latter were replaced by a benign, patronizing tone:

"Well, boys, how now?"

"Well, lads, what ho?"

"Well, fellows, how are things?"

The soldiers abhorred this tone and these expressions. But a respect for rank, characteristic of Russian soldiers, forced the wounded to adapt themselves to Krasikov's tone and answer in the same way, though somewhat surlily:

"Not bad, Comrade Colonel...."

"Tank troops never say die!"

The doctors came up, and Krasikov talked to them about the recent fighting and about the significance of the capture of Altdamm and the annihilation of the German formations threatening the right flank.

"Altdamm," said Krasikov, "resisted desperately. I had to lead one of our regiments in the attack personally." After a pause he asked abruptly: "Where's Koltsova?"

"In the surgical tent, operating on the wounded."

"Will she be free soon?"

"She will."

"I'll wait."

The Colonel went for a walk round the village. In the distance he caught a glimpse of a wood and a lake. An endless line of wagon-trains was moving along the main road. Liberated foreigners walked beside them. Some French prisoners of war, liberated by our troops on the Baltic coast, were travelling south on a high farmer's cart to which powerful Russian *bityugi** had been harnessed. A tricolour banner was draped over the cart.

People wore berets, caps of a military pattern, slouch hats and cloth caps. Krasikov waved to them and walked back to the village.

Evacuation of the wounded had already begun. Ambulance buses had drawn up in a long line down the street. Ambulance men with stretchers were bustling about everywhere.

* Russian cart horses.

Next to his own Krasikov noticed another car. It was a new one, very beautiful, a captured Opel-Admiral. Both drivers—his own and another—were looking over the car, discussing its merits.

"Who's arrived?" asked Krasikov.

"Colonel Vorobyov."

"What for?"

The driver was confused and said:

"To see Koltsova."

Krasikov's eyes widened. But the next moment everything was clear. Out of the surgical tent came a big, cheery, smiling Vorobyov and Tanya. The Divisional Commander's left hand was bandaged, his frontier guard's green cap was perched dashingly at the back of his head.

"Wounded?" asked Krasikov.

"Yes, slightly," replied Vorobyov.

There was laughter in his cunning, grey eyes and he looked at Krasikov a trifle mockingly. Or perhaps Krasikov imagined it.

"When did that happen to you?" asked Krasikov.

"Some time ago."

"Why didn't we hear about it?"

Vorobyov grinned:

"Ordered no one to report it. Thanks, Tatyana Vladimirovna, for coming to the rescue," he took Tanya's hand and kissed it. "A golden hand! And golden lips: didn't give anything away. The trouble is, I mustn't kiss them—she is a subordinate after all!" He laughed, then asked: "And why are you here? Ill?"

"Teeth," mumbled Krasikov.

"Oh, teeth!" Vorobyov smiled. Krasikov began to feel uncomfortable, but the Divisional Commander at once began to talk about something else: "I heard you led a battalion in attack yesterday?"

"Yes, that's so," said Krasikov carelessly.

"Have you seen the car?" asked Vorobyov, pointing to it. "My scouts captured it. It used to belong to General Denecke, the Commander of the Ninth German Paratroop Division. There was even a parachute in the baggage compartment. Apparently the General had to bail out of the car without it. . . ."

When Vorobyov had gone, Krasikov glanced for the first time at Tanya. She was very attractive in her white gown and white cap with her big clear eyes looking seriously and coldly at Krasikov.

"Where are you quartered here?" asked Krasikov. "I must talk to you."

"Nowhere yet," said Tanya. "Wounded began to arrive as soon as we unloaded."

"Let's take a walk," suggested Krasikov.

They walked about the village.

"When I asked you to become my wife," he said after a silence, "I was not joking. And yesterday, during the battle, in the face of danger, I thought over everything once more and understood everything." He opened his field bag and pulled out a letter. "Here is a letter to my wife in which I tell her that I love you and that I am breaking off my relations with her. I've done with the past, Tanya," he took her hand and pressed it firmly. "We are being transferred," his voice grew solemn, "to the advance on Berlin. . . . We are faced with the last battle of the war. And all this seems to coincide . . . with our personal happiness. . . ." Tanya was silent and he went on quickly: "And about that nurse. . . . I appreciate your kind feelings towards people, Tanyusha. I was hasty. The order about that woman has been cancelled. She is already with the Battalion Commander again. For some time now—several days." Tanya looked at him in surprise but said nothing.

Krasikov put his letter into the pocket of her gown and mumbled in confusion:

"And there's something else I wanted to tell you, Tanyusha... There, in that letter, not everything is written, so to speak, absolutely truthfully.... I have written that I met you in '41.... And further, that you treated me when I was wounded then, in '41.... I did it so that it would look somehow more proper, better...."

Tanya's cheeks were burning. Her silence was already beginning to worry him when suddenly she pulled the letter out of her pocket, tore it up and threw it on the grass.

"That's that," Tanya spoke at last. Shaking her head she said without anger, but with grieved surprise and reproach in her voice: "Oh, what a rotten man you are! How wretched!"

And she walked back into the village.

Krasikov stood still until Tanya was out of sight. Then he picked up the torn halves of the letter, stuffed them into his pocket and walked to his car.

After Krasikov's departure the Medical Battalion became noisy and animated. Somehow the women found out what had happened. Levkoyeva ran into Tanya's tent, shook her hand for a long time and kissed her, saying: "Good girl, Tanyusha! I know everything...."

Tanya smiled sadly.

"I'm sure you do! Just try and hide something in our Medical Battalion."

Masha was very pleased. She had always been of the opinion that a man ought "to have his wings clipped," and not be given "too much of his own way."

"If you give them their own way," she said to Tanya, walking about the village with her and holding her hand like a little girl, "they'll sit on your head. Even when there's communism there'll still be plenty of bother with these men!"

Glasha who was busy with the evacuation of the wounded nevertheless found a spare minute and ran in

to see Tanya. Here she learnt that she unknowingly had been concerned in Tanya's break with Krasikov. Much surprised, she sighed and burst into tears, saying:

"Wonderful!... That's just what he deserved!"

The women of the Medical Battalion—a sweet-natured, noisy, kind and talkative tribe—seemed to be in an especially joyful mood, as if they, too, as well as Tanya, had performed an important feat.

They were not only glad that Tanya had put Krasikov to shame. A higher feeling had triumphed—the joy of people when they see the purity and strength of human character that makes no bargains with its conscience. When they had finished their work the women and girls sat down on the steps and began singing Russian songs. They sang of the death of Ermak and of the accordion player in the front-line wood, of the broad Volga and the grey old Dnieper.

And so they sat close together, until late, and their gentle women's voices rang out in the warm night air, arousing in the hearts of the soldiers passing along the dark roads a sweet sadness—yearning for the motherland.

XXI

The talk about transferring the divisions to the south proved to be well founded.

The Supreme High Command had approved this transfer a few days ago, after which all documents relating to the march were worked out at Front Headquarters. Itineraries and concentration points were put down on maps. Then the telegraph and telephone began to transmit long columns of figures, code messages, orders, inquiries.

Liaison officers from Front Headquarters went by aeroplane and car to Army Headquarters; other officers

dashed in cars and on horseback to Corps Headquarters; from the corps still others hurried on horseback and on foot to the headquarters of the divisions.

On the way from the High Command to the company an order grows smaller and smaller. It arrives at the company in the form of a telephone call from the Battalion Commander:

"Alert your men."

While the order to march had already reached Divisional Headquarters, Captain Chokhov sat serenely on a heap of fishing nets beside a fishing hut on the Oder. The sun had risen, but the cold of the night could still be felt in the air, and the branches of the trees with their closed buds shivered sensitively. Red streaks were reflected on the smooth surface of the river. There was a smell of a fire dying out not far away.

Nearby, someone stirred and raised his head. It was Slivenko.

"Good morning to you," he said.

Chokhov nodded in reply.

"There's something written about us in the divisional newspaper," said Slivenko and offered Chokhov a small newspaper.

Chokhov ran his eyes over an article entitled: "Officer Chokhov's men are always ahead." A flush of pleasure glowed on the Captain's face.

He said:

"Thanks to the men. And thank you, Party organizer, for your help."

"I serve the Soviet Union," answered Slivenko, in accordance with the regulations.

The soldiers woke up one by one, yawned and blinked luxuriously at the sun.

"Dreamt I saw the wife," said someone.

"So that's why you jumped as if you'd been scalded."

"We were sitting by the samovar, in the garden,"

the soldier went on. "We've got a good garden. Yes.... We sit under the cherry tree and drink tea with hot *pampushki*.* My wife doesn't half do those *pampushki* well. And springtime all round ... and the wife...."

"Like a *pampushka* herself, very likely," laughed someone.

"Yes, a bit," agreed the soldier willingly, with a broad smile.

"Reveille!" boomed the mighty voice of the Sergeant-Major in the distance. "How long can you fellows sleep?... Semiglav for breakfast duty! Everybody oil and clean your weapons! Lively! Who did I tell yesterday to sew on his strap? The needle and thread are with me! Look lively!"

His voice thundered over the river.

The scout observers countered cheerfully from a nearby attic:

"What are you straining yourself for, Sergeant-Major? You ought to be singing in the Bolshoi Theatre with a voice like that!"

The Sergeant-Major threw off his tunic and undershirt and went down to the river. When he reached the water's edge he took off his boots, went into the water and began to wash. He splashed water on his head, his neck and body down to the waist.

"Mind you don't freeze, Sergeant-Major!" shouted the sappers from the next hut.

The Sergeant-Major did not deign to answer them. He put on his boots, his shirt and tunic over his wet body, pulled his belt tight, gathered his tunic in smart folds at the back, turned round to the soldiers and again shouted:

"Lively!"

A signaller came out of the hut and said to Chokhov: "Comrade Captain, 'Violet' is calling you."

* Ukrainian buns.

Chokhov went unhurriedly into the hut and took up the telephone receiver. Veselchakov's voice greeted him:

"Chokhov! Alert the company. And then report to me."

Putting down the receiver, Chokhov stood for a few seconds reflecting, then asked himself aloud:

"Now where are we going?"

He stood for a moment longer as if waiting for an answer, then went out to give the necessary orders.

While Godunov disposed of the small affairs of the company, Chokhov set off to Battalion Headquarters. The house and the yard were alive with the bustle of departure. Signallers were winding in wires, drivers cranking up cars.

The company commanders and the commanders of the attached reinforcements had already assembled with Veselchakov. No one had expected that they would have to start on the road so soon. Veselchakov related in a low voice what he had heard from Major Migayev.

"They say it's towards Berlin."

"So they couldn't manage without us after all," smiled one of the artillerymen with satisfaction.

The Commander of the First Company asked where the soldiers would be fed.

Veselchakov pointed at the map:

"Here, we'll have breakfast in this wood. The battalion kitchen will be there by that time." He looked through the company lists and shook his head: "Not many men."

"They'll send some," said one of the commanders.

They all went back to their units. Chokhov, who had lingered behind, asked the Battalion Commander:

"What road shall we use?"

Veselchakov waved his hand: what difference did it make anyway, but Chokhov repeated insistently:

"What road?"

Veselchakov let him look at the itinerary.

It was almost the same route along which they had come, only bearing slightly towards the west. Then a concentration in a forest and what after that only the High Command knew.

Chokhov cheered up imperceptibly. He always cheered up imperceptibly for those around him.

A good thing these foreigners will know that the word of a Soviet officer is his bond: promised to come back—came back, thought Chokhov not without a desire to hide even from himself his interest in the coming meeting with Margarete.

On the way back to the company he thought of Margarete and it somehow seemed to him that she was still sitting as before, on the window sill, wet-haired and happy, and waiting.

The march began: the columns stretched out from Altdamm in a southerly direction. Vehicles hooted, horses neighed, nailed boots tramped along the asphalt, capes flapped open.

Chokhov rode slowly along in front of his company. Behind him the soldiers talked in quiet voices, recalling the details of the fighting for Altdamm, the attack on the German cutter, the remarks that Pichugin used to make.

The sides of the road were littered with mangled bicycles, battered German guns and wrecked vehicles.

Now and then came the monotonous voices of those in the rear:

“Keep to the right!...”

The soldiers squeezed over to the right-hand side of the road, and lorries, guns and “Katyushas” rumbled past.

In the distance Chokhov saw several cars standing under a tree at the crossroads. The Divisional Commander and the Political Department Chief were walking about near them. At the side of the road stood Vika, smiling at the passing units.

Chokhov looked round at his men and quietly ordered:

"Brace up. The General is meeting us," and with a salute he reported on the move: "Second Rifle Company following the route. Company Commander, Captain Chokhov, reporting."

The General's tall *papakha*, Colonel Plotnikov's kindly face and Vika's slim figure floated past.

"At ease," said Chokhov.

After a time, Major Migayev rode up to him on his dark bay mare. For a minute he rode silently beside Chokhov, then said:

"You've been recommended for the Order of the Patriotic War, first class, for the Altdamm battles. Two orders in a month. Not so bad, eh?"

"No, not so bad," said Chokhov.

"And your men have been recommended too, some of them posthumously. Mind and keep up to the mark, we're counting on you."

He looked at Chokhov, waiting for an answer. At last Chokhov said:

"Thanks. I'll try."

Migayev rode off, terribly pleased, and thought, grinning cunningly to himself: Ah you, young whippersnapper! You talked, you squeezed two words out, anyhow.... And looking round at Chokhov, thought: Poor fellow.

Early in the morning on the third day the unit passed along the road six kilometres west of the estate where Margarete Reen lived. Chokhov kept on looking worriedly at the map and at last made up his mind. Of course, it was a clear breach of discipline. For the last time, thought Chokhov, looking round uneasily at his men and watching the dark bay mare of the Hero of the Soviet Union in the distance. While they were resting he called the Sergeant-Major to him and said:

"I'll be away for two hours. If they ask...."

Godunov smiled reassuringly:

"Right you are! Stopped to water your horse...."

The Sergeant-Major was an understanding fellow.

Chokhov put spurs to his horse and galloped off along a cart track. Soon he came out on a parallel road, along which another division was passing. A colonel with a bandaged hand and wearing a green frontier-man's cap, stood beside a car, watching his units go by, just as General Sereda had done. A pontoon battalion went past, then the self-propelled artillery. When the traffic stopped for a minute Chokhov galloped across the road and again galloped along a cart track.

In the wood it was cool and deserted. But on one of the paths Chokhov noticed two wandering men: one big and bald, the other thin, wearing a woman's kerchief on his head and a black slouch hat over the kerchief. They were apparently Poles, anyhow red and white ribbons fluttered on their lapels, and the man in the kerchief, noticing Chokhov, bowed to him and said:

"Dziękujemy za wyzwolenie".*

The two wended their way slowly towards the south, and Chokhov galloped on further. Coming out on the fringe of the wood, he caught sight of the village he was looking for straight ahead. He spurred his horse. The sun had risen fairly high and the trees threw long pale shadows on the young grass.

The manor house was smoking. It had been burnt down almost to the ground. In the yard, as before, stood the Mercedes-Benz with its wooden shafts. Chokhov's carriage was not there.

Chokhov went up to the wooden hut where the foreigners had been living. The hut was empty. The wooden trestle beds with straw mattresses made of sacking were standing along the walls. In the corner where Margarete and her friend, the French woman, had lived, hung a dirty lithograph.

* Thank you for liberation.

"Gone," said Chokhov.

He went out of the hut and stood in the yard. They were wrong to burn it down, he thought, looking at the smoking remains of the once beautiful manor house. Could have been made into a club or a reading room and library....

He untethered his horse, climbed into the saddle and rode slowly back, to catch up with his company. On the main road from north to south, carts of chattering foreigners went by, but it was not *them*. Then it grew very quiet, and only from somewhere far off could the buzz of cars be heard.

"Everyone's going home," said Chokhov addressing his horse, which pricked up his ears in reply, "and we'll be going soon. Yes, we'll soon be going home, to our own place. Done our job, liberated all those who needed it. Put things in order."

The horse listened with one ear to the words of his rider. Chokhov had not been alone for a long time—hardly once through all the years of war. Now he was quite alone and he thought aloud. The horse listened and twitched his ears.

"Yes," said Chokhov, "that's what we've done. Taken care of everybody.... Wait a bit, we'll smash the swine—and then we'll go home too."

The sun began to grow hotter. It was quiet. Chokhov saw a village not far off and a small lake and, remembering Godunov's words, decided that he really would water his horse. He dismounted and led his horse down to the water's edge.

Soldiers were sitting by the lake. They were eating tinned meat with big spoons—methodically, not taking too much but not very little either—and listening attentively to a ginger-moustached Siberian who sat in their midst on a German shell box.

In the storyteller Chokhov at once recognized his fellow traveller of the carriage.

"... But Ilya Muromets rode on," related the Siberian, grinning to himself in his moustache, "like a motor car: rode for three hours—covered three hundred versts! And then, when he saw yon brigand and yon bed, he goes and smacks the brigand on to the bed.... It turned over, they say, and pitched the brigand into a deep cellar. Then our Ilya tore the locks off the cellar door and brought to light a good forty strapping Russian knights. However, Ilya says to them: 'Go your ways, lads, to your own parts and pray to God for Ilya Muromets. Were it not for me, you'd all have met your end by now!' Well, there you are. That one my grandmother told me...."

Then the command rang out:

"Fall in!"

The soldiers jumped to it, not forgetting, however, to scrape the last remnants out of the tins, sorted out their rifles quickly and ran to form up. At that moment Ginger recognized Chokhov and shouted joyfully:

"Good day, Comrade Captain! Do you recognize me?"

"I do," said Chokhov.

"Well, to Berlin?"

"To Berlin," said Chokhov.

The soldiers moved off. From the north, from the Baltic Sea, the wind blew behind the soldiers, and their capes flapped in the wind. And at the village windows fluttered white flags.

SRI PRATAP COLLEGE
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Part Three



On the Road
to Berlin



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I

SPRING came, but people were as usual too busy to notice it. Of course, the soldiers were glad of the warmth, but to them it seemed that this warmth came not from the sun and that the trees were sprouting not from the April juices which seethed in the reviving earth.

If the soldiers so much as thought of spring and spoke about it, it was only in connection with home and motherland. "They are already ploughing there," said the collective farmers of yesterday. "The starling boxes are waiting for their guests," said the boys of yesterday.

Here, in a foreign land, there was no spring; victory was near and it seemed quite natural that victory should come with sunlight and the joyful song of birds.

Thus it was that the soldiers sensed this spring on the Oder, the spring of the year 1945.

The gardens began to bloom. Nightingales burst into song in the woods. By day, a rural stillness reigned over the Oder. Snipe flew low over the marshes. The cocks crowed in the Oder villages, lazily flapping their wings. But by night, work seethed feverishly everywhere, hidden, painstaking and secret. The darkness of the alien night sighed, cursed softly in pure Russian and gasped like Volga boatmen: now it was the sappers at work, making parts for the huge bridge crossings; now it was units arriving and fixing up temporary quarters, camouflaging

with branches the extra high-calibre guns which had just arrived, unloading boxes of cartridges.

The singing of the nightingales was interrupted by the Germans' artillery attacks. One gun would open fire, then another would reply, then a third. Then a battery, alarmed God-knows-by-what, would start letting off random volleys. Soon, nearly the whole German artillery would be firing. It reminded one of dogs barking at night in some lost village: the alarmed barking of one dog arouses the answering bark of another—and then the whole village is soon yapping in wild alarm. Later it comes out that all round is quiet and there is nothing to bark about, and the dogs fall silent one by one. Again spring stillness reigns and it turns out that the nightingales have not stopped singing at all; they are still trilling away.

At dawn on the marshy shores of the big river everything would again grow still. The sun rising on the distant Russian plains would shed the purple radiance of dawn over the river. The sparrows would awaken.

But in this false stillness there was a feeling of tense expectation, the hardly restrainable excitement of the two gigantic camps on both sides of the purple waters.

The observers' time had come. All eyes and all optical appliances were levelled at the opposite bank. From towers and attics, from the tops of trees, from dugout slits and dense bushes, from all observation posts: forward, base and emergency—scouts and artillerymen, officers of all ranks and all kinds of weapons, kept their watch. Reconnaissance planes took off from front-line aerodromes and hovered for long over main roads and railways, making searches and taking photographs.

Captain Meshchersky and his scouts constructed an observation post in a pine wood. They boarded up three pine trees growing close together, and fixed a platform almost at the very top. On the platform they made a table

and placed beside it a comfortable old armchair brought from one of the houses. Among the branches, camouflaged with pine needles, stood a telescope, and on the table lay a plan of observation fixed with brass drawing pins, and a notebook for remarks. There was also a field telephone. The observation post could be reached from the ground by means of a steep ladder made of planks.

The platform swayed in the gusts of the wind. A stork, which had nested a day or two ago in a shell-blasted pine tree nearby, peered curiously with black beady eyes over its orange beak at the wild, half-man, half-stork beings sitting in their absurd nest. Soon the stork's wife arrived, they flew together back and forth, squawking and staring curiously at Meshchersky and his comrades, sometimes talking to each other in their own way, in stork language. When the storks flew away to the west the scouts would shout after them:

"Mind, don't go chattering to the Germans about our nest!"

One morning, the scouts heard footsteps in the bushes and the sound of a merry voice:

"Where are you, dear comrades?"

The scouts looked down and gasped: the Major of the Guards! All of them, except Voronin, who remained at the telescope, hopped down like squirrels.

Major Antonyuk had also arrived with Lubentsov. Lubentsov was still limping and leaning on a stick.

After greeting the scouts he climbed up with difficulty, looked through the telescope, scanned the observation notes and said, dissatisfied:

"Rather a long way from the Germans!... You won't see anything clearly from here!... Surely you could have built it nearer the river!"

Antonyuk stood at the foot of the tree listening to the conversation above.

Voronin answered hesitantly:

"Of course, we could, Comrade Major... Take a look."

He pointed the telescope to a mound, just by the river.

Antonyuk cursed to himself. After all, he too had long ago asked the scouts if there were not a better place for an O.P. but this same Voronin had answered then:

"Where would you find a better one?... Here it's high, but there it's all marsh, marsh."

"Ought to have had a look myself!" Antonyuk was angry with himself.

The voice of the Guards Major came from above:

"Good then! We'll set up an O.P. there, and keep this one for emergency, in case the Germans discover us there."

Lubentsov came down and, at last, broke the news:

"In a few days we shall make a raid. We need a prisoner desperately."

They sat down on the grass. Meshchersky said:

"They've got a battle outpost there, in a peat shed on the marsh. It's the most convenient target. I watch them all the time. The Germans row there in a boat at seven o'clock in the evening and row away to their trench at six in the morning. Usually there are five of them. Yesterday, though, there were eight. They send up rockets from there. Today, two of them bathed before leaving. They are armed with a machine gun and rifles."

When Meshchersky had finished, Lubentsov said:

"All right, we'll see." Looking round at the storks he lowered his voice: "Offensive—in a few days."

The scouts pricked up their ears.

Of course they all knew that the offensive would soon begin, but the secrecy which surrounded the preparations had deceived not only the Germans but our own soldiers and officers too. Even the commanders of the corps and divisions did not know anything for sure. And although the generals could make rough guesses, the day of the

offensive apparently was known only to the Supreme Commander-in-Chief. Lubentsov spoke to the scouts with such certainty about it only because of what he had heard from General Sizokrylov.

When he had been discharged from the Medical Battalion Lubentsov had spent some time at Army Headquarters. He had at once plunged into a tense and active life, which made a pleasant contrast to the quiet vegetation in the Medical Battalion. They showed him maps with data supplied by intelligence. The Germans had built up powerful field defences beyond the Oder: a thickly woven net of trenches, scarps, anti-tank ditches and mine fields. All this had been given armour concrete roofing and twined with barbed wire. It had been established that there was increased and almost continual movement of German infantry, cars and caterpillar tractors along the roads from Berlin to the front lines. And builders from Todt,* workers' battalions and tens of thousands of people from the local population were swarming on all the roads from the front line to Berlin.

Colonel Malyshev explained the situation in detail to Lubentsov. It was a long time since they had taken a "tongue" because our troops were separated from the Germans by a river, by two rivers, in fact: the Oder, from where it branched apart into the Alte Oder, flowed into two channels that were actually two parallel rivers, between which lay a marshy water meadow cut by deep streams. Nevertheless, it was necessary to ascertain the exact nature of the German grouping and for this a "tongue" was needed.

"As soon as you get back," said Malyshev anxiously, "set about capturing a prisoner. At all costs!"

In the evening, when Lubentsov was about to leave, the reconnaissance department received a telephone

* Todt organization—a military engineering organization in the Nazi army.

message to say that General Sizokrylov had just arrived and wanted to question Lubentsov about his stay in besieged Schneidemühl.

The General listened to the Guards Major's story with deep attention. To tell the truth, he was admiring the open, clever face of the scout. He was thinking: What a pity if he had been killed! I wonder if his father is alive? The General even wanted to ask Lubentsov about this but changed his mind and did not ask. He only said:

"What you have told me has been very instructive. I was listening to something like the confession of a Communist of the younger generation. I should tell you that your staunchness in carrying out your duty in those exceptional circumstances emphasizes again that a new Stalin generation worthy of the tasks lying before us has entered the historical arena. It has been tested by this war."

Lubentsov could not find anything to say in reply. What was there to say to that? It would be good to go up to Sizokrylov and tell him all that filled his soul: what happiness it was to be a Soviet soldier, a fighter for a just cause.

If Lubentsov did not say all this it was not for lack of words. It was simply that he had been brought up in a family of workers, where long outpourings of the soul were not respected, where everything that smacked of sentimentality was considered immodest, even unworthy. They loved passionately but silently: their liking was more often expressed in the form of an affectionate joke than as a confession.

Without noticing it himself, Lubentsov sighed deeply. And that perhaps was the best answer. The General smiled, stood up and said:

"Are you going back to your own unit?"

"Yes, Comrade General," replied Lubentsov. "We have

a complicated problem ahead of us—we shall be fetching a prisoner across the Oder."

"Perhaps for the last time," said Sizokrylov. "In a few days the great offensive will begin, the last of this war. I ask you to be careful, don't let yourself be carried away and don't risk your life unnecessarily."

When Lubentsov left the General, the scent of the real, warm spring evening outside made him catch his breath with pleasure.

A car was waiting for him.

Lubentsov was silent all the way. Only from time to time did he hurry the overcautious driver:

"Faster, friend, faster!"

Arriving at his division, Lubentsov did not wait to see the Divisional Commander who had left to visit one of the regiments, but at once set off to the O.P. with Antonyuk.

II

Once again the routine of a division on the defensive began for Lubentsov, and once again the scout's usual, gnawing problem arose—the problem of a prisoner, "a tongue." It was still difficult for Lubentsov to walk or ride on horseback so he preferred not to leave the O.P. at all. Together with Meshchersky and Voronin he sat at the telescope and kept a close watch on what was happening on the river and on the water meadow.

All kinds of domestic objects floated down the Oder, apparently from Frankfurt or Küstrin, where battles had taken place not long ago. Lubentsov began to watch these objects and noticed that the current carried them sideways to the west bank.

He became thoughtful, knitted his brows and looking first at Meshchersky then at Voronin, asked:

"Shall we try it?"

They did not understand.

"When it gets dark, have a tree cut down and at dawn release it and let it float. . . . And we'll watch."

Not catching the drift of his ideas Meshchersky and Voronin looked at each other, puzzled. Lubentsov smiled: "You're a fine pair. . . ."

In the evening, the scouts, who lived in a dugout not far from the new O.P., cut down a tree as they had been ordered.

The Major visited them at dawn.

"Reveille!" he shouted, leaning over the entrance to the dugout.

The scouts dragged the tree down to the river and Lubentsov walked slowly back to the O.P.

It grew lighter and lighter. Voronin arrived, and reported that the tree was afloat.

"Watch it," said Lubentsov and put the binoculars to Voronin's eyes.

After twenty-two minutes the tree was carried by the current to the sand spit on the west bank. It bumped on this spit, glided back to the middle of the river again and floated on calmly towards the sea.

That, then, would be the way *there*.

Now it only remained to find the way back, and that was the hardest part. Of course the ideal raid is a noiseless raid. However, in this case it would be foolish to count on that, the more so because in the event of failure the results might prove fatal: if they were discovered the scouts would have to swim the river under fire from the Germans, and with a prisoner too. On reflection, Lubentsov decided to give up the idea of a noiseless raid and fixed upon this plan: the scouts would float under the cover of the tree, holding on to the branches and trunk, but in no way hastening the progress of the tree so as not to attract the Germans' attention. After twenty-two minutes they would be on the west bank. From there

they would crawl through the low but fairly dense bushes, climb across a dyke and break through to the peat shed standing on the marsh. Then the artillery would immediately go into action, including mortars and all types of light arms. The fire would crash on to the German front line and the scouts, meanwhile, would deal with the Germans in the peat shed, capture one of them and retire quickly to the bank. Here the scouts would send up a green rocket, after which the artillery would intensify its fire even more, in order to keep the enemy down for twelve minutes. During those twelve minutes the scouts with their prisoner would re-cross the river, swimming.

At last the plan was worked out, reported to the Chief of Staff and to the Commander of the Division, confirmed and agreed to the last detail with the artillery and mortars. Now it remained only to choose the men for the raid. And here the Guards Major hesitated. As he sat with the scouts in the forest, having supper with them, he listened in silence to the outwardly carefree talk. He knew that they were waiting for his word.

It was not so easy to decide who would make up the group. Lubentsov looked from under lowered brows at the young dark and fair faces, so unlike each other, and so dear to him. It would be a dangerous job. And at about a hundred kilometres from Berlin, at the very end of the war, it was especially difficult to say to anyone of them:

"You go!"

But it had to be done, and Lubentsov said:

"Voronin, Mitrokhin, Savelyev, Gushchin, Opanasenko."

Those whom he had named did not so much as bat an eyelid, they just stopped talking—but not for more than half a second—and then went on with their former conversation.

Soon Lubentsov was summoned by the Divisional Commander.

"Is everything ready?" he asked.

"Yes, Comrade General."

"Who is going, or rather, floating in command?"

"Voronin."

The General thought hard for a moment.

"No," he said. "An officer is needed there. The operation is very complicated. Send Meshchersky."

Lubentsov looked fixedly at the General.

"I would rather not send him," he said slowly.

"Sorry for him?"

"Yes."

"And not sorry for the soldiers."

Lubentsov retorted:

"And sorry for the soldiers too. But Meshchersky is a poet. . . . He writes poetry."

"Poet, poet!" the General laughed. "If he were a poet they would have published him in the papers."

Lubentsov said dryly:

"Everything in its own time."

"A poet, you say?" asked the General again, thoughtfully. Then, screwing up his eyes, he smiled: "Well, all right then. Let him go on the raid, or he won't have anything to write about. There must be an officer there!" he ended firmly.

"Yes!" said Lubentsov grimly.

He summoned Meshchersky and those detailed for the raid, and set off with them in a captured car to lake Mantsee.

This lake, situated in the rear of the division, was over two kilometres long. The scouts practised swimming all that evening and half the night, and Lubentsov, sitting on the bank, timed their speed. They swam in full equipment with sub-machine guns and "a prisoner" who, to his great indignation, was represented by Lubentsov's new orderly, young Corporal Kablukov.

When the scouts at last climbed out of the water and

sat down, tired, on the bank, Voronin, looking thoughtfully at the lake, said:

"If only we get hold of a good German, with some sense, not one of those daft fellows!..."

The next day, before the raid, the scouts washed their tunics in the Oder and sewed on clean collars. They busied themselves in the dugout at the O.P. and talked about trifling things. Lubentsov examined his map for the thousandth time. Sometimes he glanced at its left hand section where Berlin lay, like a huge spider.

The nightingales sang and sang and the spring stars winked in the heavens. The tense stillness grew stiller and the rumble of the artillery served only to emphasize it.

On these dark nights at the front everything that was happening around seemed ordinary and quite familiar. Only occasionally would the thought pass through your head that you were not just on one of a thousand other captured rivers, but on the Oder itself.

The scouts talked quietly about one thing or another, spun yarns and only occasionally would someone let drop, as if by chance, a phrase such as:

"Did you see the fires this morning? They are bombing Berlin...."

"I wonder if Hitler is there, or has he already taken to his heels?"

And they would all smile to themselves at the thought that two words so far removed from each other as "Berlin" and "here" should now be synonymous.

The big alder tree they had prepared earlier was carried down quietly into the water. To make the foliage thicker they had tied on branches cut from other young trees. The scouts, in green cloaks, merged completely into the leaves.

Muffled voices were heard:

"Ready?"

"Ready."

"Good luck, Sasha!"

"See you again, Comrade Major!"

"Let her go!"

The lone tree floated downstream in a patterned mass of other objects: boards, beams, barrows, chairs, wrecked boats.

III

Lubentsov and all other observers noticed that tonight the Germans were keeping very quiet, hardly firing at all, and sending up rockets only rarely. Lubentsov had good reason to be glad of this but, of course, could not know what the matter was.

As a matter of fact, the German forward units were awaiting the arrival of a very important personage, whose name no one yet knew. The scrubbing and cleaning of dugouts and uniforms and the shearing and shaving of soldiers had begun.

The arrival of the visitors from Berlin was quite unexpected, even for the Commander of the Army Group, Colonel-General Heinritzi. The General, who had only just been appointed to this post, was thoroughly depressed. On the Vistula, when the army was strong and complete with regular units, it had been under the command of the SS man Himmler—a famous executioner but a worthless military leader. Now, when the army had been smashed and the divisions were filled with untrained youths and old men from the Volkssturm, he, a regular army general, had been appointed to command the group.

With a feeling of profound contempt the General looked through the notes which the Reichsführer of the SS had left among the staff papers. Some kind of astrological meanderings, quotations about the art of war... from the 9th century, idiotic comparisons of his own per-

son with that of Henry the Fowler, whose incarnated image Himmler, as rumour had it, considered himself to be,—all this unnerved the sober General.

Such was the new commander's mood when the adjutant ran in and reported the arrival of Reichsministers von Ribbentrop and Rosenberg.

The ministers were extremely surprised that the General had not been informed of their visit. Apparently Berlin had forgotten to send a message.

"A common occurrence in the dreadful confusion there!" snorted von Ribbentrop.

It turned out that they had arrived at the front as propagandists: to raise the fighting spirit of the troops.

The General decided that the ministers, who must have their main duties to attend to, would be in a hurry, and asked if they wished to drive out to the units at once. But, evidently, they were in no hurry. Then the General suddenly realized that Herren ministers had simply *nothing to do* in Berlin. Simply nothing to do! The General, of course, could not know of von Ribbentrop's feverish activities behind the scenes. And Rosenberg? He still ranked as Minister of Eastern Territories, which seemed particularly foolish and absurd in the present situation, when Soviet troops were on the Oder.

The General informed the ministers of his vain attempts to force the Russians out of the captured bridgehead on the west bank of the Oder. At this the ministers were quiet and very sad.

Yet one could see that here they were resting like schoolboys who had run away from their teacher's care. It really was impossible now to remain near the Führer, in the bomb-shelter under the Reichschancellery. Orders were given and at once cancelled. Hysterics, endless tirades against everyone, and that long-legged woman Braun poking her nose into everything. A court melodrama of a decadent epoch. In the most depressing

surroundings. Berlin, itself, was crowded with refugees from the East. People were sleeping in the tunnels of the underground. At night, savage murders and robberies took place. Gangs of deserters had taken refuge among the ruins. Important state officials left the capital without permission and fled no one knew where.

Here, at the command post, everything seemed precise and orderly. Officers came and went, orders were given in concise military language, polished boots trod confidently over the parquet flooring. Maps were drawn up in different colours and dotted with flags.

There was an appearance of complete order.

But Rosenberg was prone to mysticism and sometimes imagined this orderly scene as a measured dance being performed around him by ghosts dressed in military uniform. From time to time he shuddered morbidly, trying to drive the terrible figures out of his mind.

As for Ribbentrop, he was very far removed from mysticism and cheered up considerably; before leaving for the front line, he said:

"The measures you have taken, Herr General, convince me that the troops of the Berlin sector have at last received a real leader, capable of carrying out the most difficult tasks here, on the Oder, the river of Germany's fate. . . . I, perhaps, do not know the Russians well enough, but my colleague, Rosenberg, who knows them well, can confirm that we shall receive no mercy from them. As for the success of the English and Americans," Ribbentrop paused significantly, "one should regard that as calmly as possible. They, in any case, will not support the striving of the masses for so-called 'social justice'. . . . On the contrary. . . . Yes, yes, just the contrary! . . ."

The generals understood Ribbentrop's words clearly enough. Units from the western and Italian fronts had arrived on the Oder. The lesser of two evils had been chosen.

Cars were provided and the ministers drove away

separately, accompanied by a numerous train of SS men and staff officers. Rosenberg headed for Bad Sarow to the Headquarters of the 9th Army, while Ribbentrop went further north to the Alte Oder—there, behind a double water barrier, it would be more peaceful, he decided.

The General accompanied von Ribbentrop.

They sat in silence on the huge leather cushions of the car. A Lieutenant-Colonel from Headquarters had taken his place beside the driver. Two SS men from the minister's personal bodyguard sat stiffly on the folding seats. An armoured car drove ahead of the minister's car.

The roads were crowded with lorries, tanks and infantry making for the Oder. Turmoil and fuss ("inevitable fuss,"—thought the Minister, reassuring himself) reigned all round. A column of nondescript vehicles had lost its way and was trying to turn round and go back. Staff officers climbed out of their cars to restore order. At length the minister's column turned off on to a side road and soon drove up to the Hohenzollern Canal. Here they had to stop for half an hour. Russian bombers were bombing the crossing. Houses were burning on the bank of the canal. They made a detour—the bridge had been damaged. It grew dark. Near Oderberg they met an army unit moving westwards. The soldiers were marching in disorder, some of them unarmed.

The General stopped the car. The Lieutenant-Colonel from General Headquarters jumped out, ran up to the Feldwebel marching in front of the soldiers and asked:

"Who are these?"

"The 600th Parachute Battalion," answered the Feldwebel, looking at his feet. "The Russians smashed us in the region of Altküstrinchen, and yesterday we received an order to go for reinforcements to Wriezen."

"Why are you wandering along like a flock of sheep?" the Lieutenant-Colonel lowered his voice angrily, glancing at the minister's car.

The Feldwebel was silent. His eyes expressed dull indifference. Both the Minister and the General came out of the car. The Minister repeated the question. The Feldwebel made the same reply. But the General's heart could not endure the Feldwebel's indifference towards everything; cursing in spite of the diplomat's presence, he asked:

"Can't you see who is talking to you?"

The Feldwebel raised his eyes slowly to the Minister and stared silently at the broad, pale, haughty face, with its sunken bluish-grey eyes. At the deep indifference of this stare a shiver ran through the Minister. The Feldwebel looked at him as if at some lifeless object. His face with its red, scrubby beard, his dirty, blistered neck and lifeless glance made a distressing impression on the Minister. Ribbentrop turned round sharply and stepped into his car.

He could not compose himself for a long time. God knows why, but it seemed to him that he had looked at the face not of some unknown Feldwebel but of the whole German army. It was a terrible face, and was there not hostility and contempt hidden behind its stubborn indifference? The guest's mood noticeably deteriorated. The journey continued in silence.

Not far from the village where the Headquarters of the Divisional Group was situated, Ribbentrop saw a strange sight: by the light of pocket torches three stalwart, cursing SS men were dragging a tall woman in a long frock out of the forest.

The General glanced sideways at the Minister. He did not want to stop the car to investigate this affair. But the Minister ordered the driver to stop. He had decided to take a walk before the meeting. Accompanied by the generals and his guard he approached the SS men. They stopped. A torch lighted up the generals' uniforms and

the broad band with a swastika on the minister's left sleeve.

"What has this woman done?" asked Ribbentrop.

Springing to attention, one of the SS men said:

"This is not a woman, Herr... er...."

"Reichsminister," one of the guard prompted him in a whisper.

The SS man stiffened even more and explained:

"This is a deserter, Herr Reichsminister.... He changed into a woman's dress and ran away from the front...."

Ribbentrop was surprised, blushed, wanted to say something but said nothing and again turning round sharply, walked towards the car. The fast drive calmed him. He even decided that what he had just seen could serve as the main theme of his speech. He would begin by speaking about traitors and would mention as an example this case of a German soldier dressing up—what a disgrace!—in a woman's frock.... This would call forth laughter and sound very well.

The soldiers were assembled in the castle of Stolpe, in an enormous hall lighted with candles. On the arrival of the Reichsminister they all raised their hands and shouted more or less together: "Heil Hitler!" The Minister mounted the rostrum and without introduction began his speech. He spoke in a level voice fixing his eyes on the swaying shadows over the men's heads.

"Germany demands from you, soldiers, unwavering fortitude," said the Minister. "At this hour when the fate of the Reich hangs in the balance, the Führer is counting on you...."

He recalled the times of Frederick the Great, when Prussia was in a no less difficult position, alone against the whole world—and yet she had endured! He recalled the history of the recent campaign in Russia. After all, the

Germans had been on the approaches to the Russian capital but the Russians, because of their staunchness—yes, staunchness—had not let the enemy enter their capital and now. . . .

The Reichsminister made a sweeping gesture in the direction of the Oder, a gesture which everybody understood well. It expressed bitterness at the present situation and "magnanimous" admission of the enemy's achievements.

"Such a miracle can happen and will happen now with us," he said after a pause. "If in our ranks there are no traitors and scoundrels who value their own miserable lives more than Germany. . . ."

Then he stumbled. The moment had come to tell of that comic and shameful episode of the soldier dressed in a woman's frock. But at the last moment the Minister hesitated. It seemed to him thoughtless and even dangerous to tell the soldiers of such a means of desertion. They would go and start changing into women's clothes, roam away by the forests and lakes, leaving the Berlin front bare. And it suddenly seemed to him that hundreds of eyes were looking at him with just the same expression of apathy as that of the Feldwebel, apathy behind which lay ill-concealed hostility and contempt.

The end of his speech was muddled. His measured tones changed to a feverish half-whisper, something which had never happened to Ribbentrop before.

"Stand in an iron wall! . . . German loyalty is our shield! . . . It is the duty of the descendants of Friedrich Barbarossa!"

What did I say? Why Barbarossa? thought the Minister confusedly. What a stupid slip. I meant to say Friedrich the Second. . . .

However, no one paid any attention to the Minister's mistake. The Divisional Commander approached solemnly, shook him by the hand and said loudly:

"On behalf of the division I thank you, Herr Reichsminister! I request you to inform the Führer of our solemn promise to stand to the last man."

This sounded very well. The hall resounded with shouts of "heil!"

Ribbentrop left the castle in an elated mood. It was not clear whether the Minister had inspired the soldiers but the soldiers had, unquestionably, inspired the Minister. He kindly agreed to take supper with the Divisional Commander, on the condition, however, that the preparation of the supper should be directed by his own ministerial cook. The generals looked at Ribbentrop with respect. You could tell he was a real gentleman, not some upstart like that Ley, who had visited the front about a fortnight ago.

Before supper the Minister went to inspect the defence works. He was impressed by the communication trenches covered with boards and dotted with embrasures, the armoured roofs, the reinforced shelters and the tanks dug into the ground.

The Divisional Commander invited him to meet Oberleutnant Hugo Winckel, a famous officer decorated with Oak Leaves to his Iron Cross. Ribbentrop was not very eager but he finally agreed.

They entered the Oberleutnant's dugout. The distinguished officer was sitting at the table, writing something rapidly. An oil lamp was burning on the table. Without looking round, the Oberleutnant shouted rudely to the visitors:

"Shut the door!"

Ribbentrop, smiling at this shout, walked up to the table, and the first thing that leapt to his eye, from the scribbling on the white sheet of paper, was the word: "Vermächtnis."*

* A will.

Ribbentrop asked sharply:

"What do you think you're writing, wretched man?"

The Oberleutnant jumped up and seeing the Minister with his retinue, hunched his shoulders as if he had been struck.

"It is too soon to think of writing your will," said the Minister, at once taking himself in hand and sneering pallidly. "It's a bad example to subordinates. Certainty of victory, that's what you ought to teach the soldiers!"

The Minister left the dugout and walked slowly along the trench. Then he stopped and began to look towards the east. A dull rumble could be heard across the river, as if the whole plain with its lakes and forests was stirring quietly, breathing deeply as if making ready to spring. The beams of distant searchlights raced across the night sky.

"The Oberleutnant is not so stupid after all," muttered Ribbentrop, shivering nervously.

He remembered 1939 and his visit to Moscow. Then from the windows of his car he had watched the Russians strolling in peaceful crowds about their capital. Now he was looking at them from a trench on the Oder.

Hatred of him in Russia must be very great. How would the Russian soldiers react if they knew that he, von Ribbentrop, was so close to them, actually here, on the Oder?

He shuddered: heavy explosions resounded on the left. They grew louder and louder. The generals became worried and began to telephone their units. At first they were informed that the Russian artillery was shelling the German positions. But after half an hour it turned out that the Russians had just kidnapped a German soldier from an outpost; apparently, they had been covering the retreat of their scouts with artillery and mortars.

"What's that, kidnapped?" asked the Minister bewildered. "What does that mean?"

The generals were silent. Heinritzi said reassuringly:

"That happens in war, Herr Reichsminister. You can't do anything about it."

Ribbentrop walked quickly down the trench to the rear. All these fortifications, the reinforced roofs of the dugouts, the machine-gun nests and barbed-wire entanglements no longer seemed to him to be a reliable protection.

He almost ran.

Come to terms with the Americans at all costs! he thought feverishly. At any price! . . . Or else it will be too late.

Why are these Yanks moving so slowly?—thought Ribbentrop with indignation, looking longingly into the pitch darkness of the night. In front of him darted the circle of light from his pocket torch. Behind sounded the hurried footsteps of the generals, who were trying not to lag behind the Minister.

Soldiers were running along the trenches. The German artillery opened fire with belated fury, crashing on to the silent forests of the east bank.

But Captain Meshchersky and his scouts were already dragging the "tongue" along their trench. They were wet and happy. On the way back the current had carried them a good kilometre downstream, but the rest of the plan could not have gone off better. In the German guard post that night there had been two, not five soldiers. They had had to make a good deal of noise but even on the German front line there had hardly been any soldiers. It was discovered later that most of them had been listening to the Reichsminister's speech in the castle of Stolpe.

IV

The captured feldwebel, Fritz Armut, turned out to be a sensible and well-informed fellow. Realizing that his fighting days were over for ever, and rejoicing frankly at this, he willingly told all he knew. And he knew a lot, because he had recently served as a clerk in Regimental Headquarters.

True, it took him a long time to come to. When they had dragged him, gagged and stunned, across the river he had swallowed a good deal of water. The scouts did not notice this at once, and when they pulled the gag out of the Feldwebel's mouth, life scarcely stirred within him. Perhaps no one—not even his wife, or his mother—had trembled so much for the life of this strapping German or cared for him so tenderly as Lubentsov and Meshchersky. They gave him artificial respiration and rubbed him down with vodka:

“Oh, Fritz, Fritz!” they sighed imploringly.

Infantrymen, artillerymen, signallers and sappers kept on putting worried faces into the dugout:

“Well, how's Fritz getting on?”

At last he recovered consciousness and they took him to Divisional Headquarters.

They went through a big forest, which was now no longer a forest but a gigantic carpenters' and blacksmiths' workshop. Here, by the flickering light of the moon, work went on busily. Sapper battalions were making parts of bridges. Thousands of men with saws and axes were swarming about the fallen tree trunks and nearly finished bridge sections.

In forges they had made themselves, at furnaces covered with tarpaulins, the smiths hammered out thousands of staples, nails and hooks. Engineers—colonels and majors—walked along the level paths, like real work superintendents and foremen.

Noticing the German under the escort of the drenched scouts in camouflage capes, the bridgebuilders,* carpenters and blacksmiths broke off from their work for a moment. They had seen prisoners during the war more than once, but this was the first time most of them had seen a German just pulled out of his trench by scouts, fresh, "still warm"—as one sapper put it.

The scouts glowed beneath the approving glances of the bridgebuilders. At Divisional Headquarters they were also met with curious glances. Everyone congratulated the soaked and smiling soldiers, and the German joined in their praises with all his heart, speaking with the air of a connoisseur:

"Oh, ja, das war fabelhaft gemacht! Aber direkt tadellos!"*

Standing on the threshold of the cottage Oganessian surveyed the cheerful German rather grimly, and being an experienced man in these matters, said:

"Well, that one will tell everything! . . . Just try to write it all down!"

Indeed, Fritz Armut knew a lot. It came out that the Divisional Group "Schwedt" was on the other side of the Oder. It had been named thus after the town where it was deployed. The group consisted of hastily assembled security, SS, supplementary, reserve, police and workers' battalions. To the south, three battalions—"Potsdam," "Brandenburg" and "Spandau"—had taken up defensive positions.

The Feldwebel had recently been in the town of Wriezen. The town was surrounded by powerful field defences. It was the Headquarters of the 606th Special Duty Division, just arrived from France. He had also seen there the Headquarters of an SS Tank Division. Lorries of infantry were moving ceaselessly through the town to the

* Yes, that was wonderfully done! Faultlessly!

front line. He knew that the positions southeast of Wriezen were defended by the 309th "Berlin" Infantry Division.

Fritz Armut gave several interesting details about the situation in Berlin. He had been told that in the government buildings on Wilhelmstrasse, particularly in the Gestapo, they were burning their files and the whole street was strewn with ashes. The brother of the Commander of the Second Battalion, a major of the General Staff, one Becker, had died unexpectedly and the Battalion Commander had been officially informed of this. Yet before a week was out, the Battalion Commander suddenly received a note from the "deceased": the Major wrote that his death was "symbolic" and that he was going to "Sp." On his birthday the Battalion Commander had blurted out something about this note to his fellow officers and soon the secret became known even to the clerks. Apparently it was not the only death of such a kind; it was "a Berlin death."

"Sp." could only mean "Spain."

Lubentsov immediately communicated all this, including information about the engineering fortifications and defence works on the Oder to Corps Headquarters and to Colonel Malyshev at Army Headquarters. Then he and Meshchersky, taking with them the record of the interrogation, set off to see General Sereda.

At the General's he found many people, including Colonel Krasikov.

As he made his report to the Divisional Commander on the information given by the prisoner, the Guards Major kept on glancing at Krasikov, studying with a feeling of involuntary dislike the big, handsome, slightly flabby face of the Colonel, heavily powdered after shaving. Horrible eyes, thought Lubentsov but then his sense of justice prompted him: Well, what am I mad about? What has he done?

Having finished his report the Guards Major fell silent, waiting for further orders.

"You've done well," said Taras Petrovich. "The German turned out to be valuable. The raid was organized excellently. You've certainly learnt to fight, lads!"

The Divisional Commander was enthusiastic about his scouts.

He would have embraced the two young men, dressed in green camouflage capes, but he did not want to show his feelings in the presence of outsiders, and he again addressed the officers who had arrived to inspect the division.

Among the officers who had come from Corps and Army Headquarters there were political workers, engineers, inspectors of defence works, artillerymen and supply officers. It was a big commission—one of those that arrive at times of strenuous defence to put the units in order. Party-political work, battle readiness—everything, down to the condition of each cavalry horse, had to be carefully studied by the commission, and the results reported to the Military Council.

Meshchersky whispered to the Major:

"How is that? And you said that there would soon be an offensive! . . ."

"Don't worry, Sasha," Lubentsov whispered back. "If a commission has come to inspect defences—expect an offensive. That's almost a rule. Look at the Divisional Commander."

Yes, apparently the Divisional Commander also knew this "rule." He nodded his head, agreed about something, argued politely, muttered something to himself, but his eyes kept smiling.

When the officers—the members of the commission—had driven off to the regiments, the Divisional Commander said to the scouts:

"Thanks, friends! You've brought joy to an old man! I am recommending you all for decorations and for you, Lubentsov, the Order of Alexander Nevsky."

The scouts were just about to leave when the door opened and a sweating and dusty junior lieutenant entered the room. He was a liaison officer. His arrival always signified important changes.

He gave the General a big, sealed envelope. The General quickly opened it, ran his eyes over the contents and his face suddenly grew solemn.

"Comrade officers," he said, "our division has received an order to cross over to the bridgehead." Turning to the Chief of Staff sitting at the table, he said: "To work! and inform members of the commission that they can go home. They can make their check in Berlin."

Lubentsov and Meshchersky ran back to their own unit.

Fritz Armut had not yet been sent to the corps and was eating his breakfast. As Lubentsov came in he jumped up, stood at attention and—oh horror!—giving way to habit, raised his hand and shouted:

"Heil . . ."

He managed to swallow the word "Hitler," realizing at once what he had done. He paled and then flushed, struck his hand: "Diese dumme Hand!"*—and his lips—"O, dieser dumme Mund!"** Evidently he was afraid they would shoot him straightaway. Understanding the comic side of his situation the scouts burst into loud laughter.

Lubentsov also laughed and said:

"Send him off quickly. We have enough to do without him."

They sent Fritz Armut to Corps Headquarters. He was happy to have been dragged out of the war by the scruff of his neck and waved for a long time to the scouts from the back of the lorry.

* This stupid hand!

** Oh, this stupid mouth!

When the scouts learnt from the Major that the division was being transferred they were rather upset. Of course, the main blow at Berlin would be delivered from the bridgehead. But all the same, it was somehow annoying to pack up suddenly and leave just now, after such a clever and skilful raid.

"Huh," sighed Mitrokhin, "we have done 'someone's' work!"

The "someone" arrived next day.

He turned out to be a very quick, sprightly captain, representing the reconnaissance of the division which was to replace General Sereda's division here.

The Guards Major showed him all the information gained from the captured feldwebel. The Captain, of course, was very glad to find the sector so well reconnoitred.

"Is your division far away?" asked Lubentsov.

"Be here tomorrow, like all troops of our front."

"Front?" Lubentsov pricked up his ears.

"Second Byelorussian Front," said the Captain. "We have finished off the enemy's East-Prussian groupings and now the entire front is coming here."

This was important news, and the Guards Major appreciated its significance.

The divisions of the Second Byelorussian Front (Marshal Rokossovsky's troops) were arriving on the Oder. They had been ordered to attack to the north of the First Byelorussian Front (Marshal Zhukov's troops) with their left flank covering the right flank of the armies taking Berlin.

Lubentsov, of course, could not know that south of the First Byelorussian Front the First Ukrainian Front (Marshal Konev's troops) would take the offensive in order to strike later with a part of its forces at Berlin from the south.

Thus tightened the fist of the three fronts, which was to descend on Berlin and put an end to the war.

Towards evening the Major received an order to go to the bridgehead to receive information about the enemy on the new sector.

His orderly, Corporal Kablukov, quickly saddled the horses. A capable lad, he carried out his duties assiduously and sensibly but had not earned one word of praise from the Guards Major: Lubentsov remembered Chibiryov too well.

V

They rode at walking pace because Lubentsov's leg still hurt him. The Major's raven-black horse, Orlik, who kept on trying to break into a trot, seemed quite surprised at the strange whim of his master.

They soon rode into a huge forest called "Forst Alt-Lützezericke" after a small town on its western edge. The ordinary German forest with firs and pines planted in straight rows and even numbered, seemed on this moonless night wild and impassable. An angry wind mumbled something absurd in the branches of the trees, following the riders like a spy.

Now and then in the darkness one could see lorries, armoured troop carriers, guns and tanks, covered with pine boughs, hiding in strained expectation on the forest paths.

Here, too, apparently, they were preparing to go across to the bridgehead.

As they drew nearer to the Oder the noise of the artillery barrage grew louder and louder. Dull and distant at first, it soon turned into a continual howl, drowning the noise of the wind and driving from one's head all thoughts except the thought of mortal danger. But this thought, however sickening it might be, could not have stopped anyone in the forest, even for one minute. The howl grew

still more furious, then stopped, only to break out again five minutes later with even greater fury.

Soon the howl mingled with the roar of engines—the irregular sullen roar of German bombers. Then across the night sky tracer bullets flashed in glittering streams, searchlights gleamed and anti-aircraft shells burst—now here, now there. Several deafening explosions shook the ground and up again rose the streams of tracer bullets—from earth to sky, very slow, as if lingering to admire their own beauty.

The forest ended suddenly. Houses cropped up at the sides of the road and the road turned into a village street. Only now did one fully realize how good it had been in the forest: one wanted, perhaps, to stop on the forest edge just for a minute or two, to enjoy the last ephemeral trace of security. But one had to go forward, into the roaring fire blazing across the river, into that thunderous dawn rising over the Oder.

The nearer one went to the river, the more threatening the world became. And in the light of the flames on the west bank and in the timid radiance of the breaking dawn Lubentsov saw the place about which the soldiers were already creating mysterious, perhaps immortal, legends.

This was the famous bridge across the Oder to the bridgehead. They called it "the bridge of death" and "the bridge of victory," "the Berlin bridge" and "hell's bridge," "sappers' death" and "Hitler kaput."

It had been built in the riverside forest by sappers, Russian workmen living in dugouts and the cellars of the houses along the bank of the river. The Germans understood very well the importance of this bridge that had sprung up one fine night over the grey waves of the Oder. And they kept it day and night under bombardment from long-range, corps and divisional artillery, ceaselessly hurling at it their bomber aircraft, heavy, medium and light.

German shells fell all round, tearing up the piles, smashing the timbers down into the water, and each time the sappers repaired the bridge, crawled fearlessly along its mighty back, died but did not cease work. It was in truth an immortal bridge, but it was built by mortal men.

The bank of the river was completely covered with craters and trenches. Here stood anti-aircraft guns, around which swarmed the soldiers of the anti-aircraft division. Diesel engines for the pile drivers, huge snakes of wire cable, winches and tractors had been wedged into the trenches. In other trenches half filled with earth soldiers were having breakfast.

The mixed smell of burning, dead horses, freshly-planed boards, smoke and oil stupefied and made one shudder.

To the left and the right of the main bridge there were two more light pontoon bridges. The men would dismantle them before daylight, concealing the pontoons in the vegetation on the bank, and then launch them again at night. The cables creaked. There was a unit in the sheds, waiting to cross. The young soldiers listened anxiously to the uncanny silence that had fallen.

And at the very edge of the bridge stood two officers, warning each man as he stepped on to the bridge:

"Hurry! Quick now! Quick as possible!"

The plank flooring of the bridge was about six metres wide, without rails and with curbs at the sides. The soldiers on duty at the crossing, with unextinguished torches in their hands although it was already quite light, also hurried on those marching and driving past:

"Quick, lads, the music will begin any minute!"

Lubentsov was moved by this care for others on the part of men who were obliged to be here all the time, at this terrible post.

In the morning mist one could see on the planks of the bridge flooring now the outlines of a dead horse, now

the bones of a wrecked vehicle—the traces of the last German raid. Orlik, who had been fairly indifferent to human corpses, reared in terror at the sight of a dead horse.

On the bridge, face to face with death, unable to dig oneself into the earth, the soldier's constant refuge, the world seemed to be quite different, almost unbearable. Here even the staunchest and hardiest veterans lost their sense of humour.

In the very middle of the bridge the quiet scrape of feet mingling with the creak of wheels and hiss of motorcar tyres was drowned in a growing roar. To the right of the bridge several shells burst in the water. Black waves rose up higher than the bridge and deluged the whole mass of men in spray and foam. The floor shook. A sickening shriek cut through the trembling air. Orlik began to dance on the spot, straining towards the water below. Lubentsov held him back with difficulty, then looked round at Kablukov. The latter was sitting in the saddle—small, tense and pale—looking fixedly at the Major. Lubentsov smiled as well as he could at him. It was not much of a smile.

"Hold on," said Lubentsov.

"Yes!" shouted Kablukov in a quavering voice.

The men moved on, quickening their pace as much as possible. Suddenly a lorry skidded to the left and drove straight into another. A shell falling into the river quite close deluged the men with a mighty fountain of water. The men rushed sideways and back, the way forward being blocked by the two crashed lorries. A wounded man shrieked. Then an irritated, commanding voice rang out:

"Keep calm!"

In the middle of the bridge stood two generals. Lubentsov recognized one of them as Sizokrylov. The second—a fragile, pale, unshaven, very unimpressive

Major-General with eyes red from lack of sleep—was the builder and chief of the crossing.

"Throw the lorries overboard!" ordered the member of the Military Council.

The soldiers rushed to carry out the command. A major who had been sitting in the cabin of the damaged lorry, came up to the General, saluted and said imploringly:

"Comrade General, I have shells for the Guards mortars in my lorry."

Sizokrylov made no reply. He watched the soldiers working in terrible haste round the lorries. The Major remained standing with his hand to his cap. Suddenly Sizokrylov turned round to him sharply and asked:

"Why don't you help?"

The Major hurriedly dropped his hand and began frenziedly pushing his lorry to the edge of the bridge. Both lorries plunged simultaneously into the water and men, carts, lorries moved on quickly.

Sizokrylov said:

"Quicker but without panic!"

The whine of shells, one, another, a third, interrupted his words but Sizokrylov went on speaking. And although no one could hear him through the whine and explosions, every one looked at the General and he went on speaking. When the shells finally burst in the river, not far off, the soldiers heard the same even voice:

"... keep your distance and don't snivel. Understand?"

"We do!" shouted the soldiers amiably, extremely pleased that these shells too had missed them.

Turning to the chief of the crossing Sizokrylov said:

"And you, Comrade General, no liberalism, if you please: anything in the way,—off and into the water!"

"Yes, Comrade member of the Military Council," said the Sapper General and added more quietly: "I insist on

your coming into my dugout. It is not safe here. Last night a colonel was killed, the Chief of the Political Department of a brigade. Yes, I insist."

"Are you suggesting that shells are dangerous only for political workers?"

They went slowly to the bank, but here Sizokrylov recognized Lubentsov riding past. After greeting him, the General said:

"They told me about your prisoner. A useful German. He supplied important corrections to our information about the German units. My regards to Sereda and his daughter. I hope she is in the second echelon."

"Yes, Comrade General," answered Lubentsov and at once regained that coolheadedness for which he had won renown.

A cloud of smoke spread over the crossing. It grew thicker and thicker, enveloping the famous bridge in dense billows: a smoke screen had been thrown across the river as German bombers approached. The barking of the anti-aircraft guns began, and soon—the roar of Soviet fighters. Somewhere high above the clouds an air battle had begun.

But Lubentsov was already on solid ground, the ground of the bridgehead.

VI

The country that stretched before Lubentsov reminded him of the front line somewhere near Orsha. The bare earth was furrowed with bullets and churned up by shells, and only its numerous canals—graben in German—protecting the low land from flooding by the waters of the Oder, remained intact. The fruit trees which grew here in abundance had been smashed to splinters and the apple blossom floated like white down over the edges of the

bomb craters. Ruined water mills stuck up on the banks of the grabens.

In the cellar of one of the mills Lubentsov found the reconnaissance officer of the regiment which was to be relieved by General Sereda's division. The officer told Lubentsov about the enemy opposite them. It was that same 606th Special Duty Division which had recently been rushed here from the western front and which Fritz Armut had mentioned.

The pale and unshaven face of the officer and, in general, the whole atmosphere at Regimental Headquarters told Lubentsov much about what the men had had to go through here, on the bridgehead. For nearly two months the Germans had been attacking them ceaselessly with tanks and infantry, shelling and bombing them, but had not been able to move them back a yard. The regiment had lost its Chief of Staff, his first assistant, its signals and artillery officers: they had either been killed or wounded. The reconnaissance officer had taken the place of the first two for a long time until, at last, new officers were sent. The commander was wounded but had stayed in action, commanding his regiment by telephone from his camp bed.

For the rest of the day the Major watched the Germans from the forward trench, comparing what he saw with what was represented on the map he had received from the reconnaissance officer.

The German forward area lay some seventy to two hundred metres away from ours. Lubentsov had never before seen so many trenches and so much barbed wire and dug earth, although he had seen plenty of the enemy's fortified areas during the war. The German defence was crammed with machine-gun nests. There was scarcely a yard of land on this low grey plain not under fire.

When it grew dark the Major left the trench, found Kablukov with the horses in a hollow behind the mill,

waited through the usual artillery bombardment and rode back to the east bank.

Here in the forest the Divisional Commander and several staff officers had already fixed themselves up in an abandoned tar works. Taras Petrovich was grim and harassed. He had arrived an hour ago after a conference with the Commander of the Army.

The division was on the march and the vanguard would soon be here. The officers kept on running out on to the forest road to see if the forward units had arrived.

For some time the General studied the map Lubentsov had brought him.

"Well," he said, "it's a defence to be reckoned with, whatever you say. Something to get your teeth into." He looked at Lubentsov, frowned and said: "And you get about too much! Mind and look after that leg of yours! Stay with me and let Antonyuk do the running!"

Antonyuk soon arrived with a staff car. Lubentsov told him to make the plan of reconnaissance and himself decided to sleep. But two hours later when Antonyuk brought him the plan, Lubentsov was unpleasantly surprised.

"What's this?" he asked his assistant. "Do you think you'll be staying on the defensive for a year? What the devil do you want a 'tongue' for when the situation is clear as it is? Just to put men in their graves? You've got to make a plan of reconnaissance for a break-through and the pursuit of the enemy. And note this, for reconnaissance under town conditions, a big town, huge, gigantic, Berlin, you understand?"

"There's been no order for the offensive," answered Antonyuk sullenly.

"There will be," retorted Lubentsov. "And it will come suddenly. And we'll be in a stupid position." After a silence he added: "I'll make the reconnaissance plan myself."

Meanwhile the regiments were arriving. They took up their positions in the darkness in prearranged areas of the huge forest, crowding in cheerily with other units that had arrived earlier.

The noise subsided. The division dropped into fretful slumber. Only in the tar works, where the Divisional Commander's Staff and Political Department had settled, did people sit all night over maps, graphs and orders. Then here too it grew quiet.

At dawn after making up the reconnaissance plan Lubentsov looked into the next room where the Divisional Commander had taken up his quarters. The General was asleep at the table, with the telephone receiver at his ear. Smiling, Lubentsov decided to disobey the order and left to see the scouts, who had camped not far off, under the pine trees. The scouts were also asleep.

Meshchersky sat nearby, writing.

"Writing poems, Sasha?" asked Lubentsov.

Meshchersky flushed and answered:

"No. A request for grenades."

"That's good too!" laughed the Major.

Voronin came up and reported to the Captain:

"Mitrokhin has a magazine that needs changing. Semyonov and Opanasenko have no knives. Gushchin's camouflage cape is torn. It needs repairing or a new one should be issued him."

Lubentsov had everybody awakened, summoned Antonyuk and in his presence outlined the task "for the period of the Berlin operation."

Staff officers came out of the tar works. They set off for the bridgehead, to take over the sector. Then the forest grew quiet again, and from a distance one might have thought only birds and squirrels lived there.

Soldiers were sitting by the forest lake. They were washing and talking quietly. Breakfast was on iron rations: there were orders to light no campfires and heat no

kitchens so as to avoid exposing the troops. The political workers were talking to the soldiers, maps of Europe hung on the trees.

The day dragged on endlessly. At last it began to grow dark. The soldiers assembled. Quiet words of command sounded in the forest. The battalions moved unhurriedly along the dark paths towards the river. The rumble of artillery sounded nearer. At the forest edge they stopped for about an hour and a half. They listened to what was happening on the river. It was very noisy there.

At 24.00 hours the divisions concentrated in the forest began to go across on all three bridges simultaneously. As the men crossed silently some of our artillery hidden in the forest spoke for the first time: it had been given orders to silence the German artillery. At dawn it was the turn of General Sereda's division to cross. German bombers attacked furiously. The anti-aircraft guns were roaring. Soviet fighters appeared and air battles, terrible in their complete isolation from the ground, began above the dark bridges which were full of whispers and the tramp of feet.

But this isolation was only apparent.

Lubentsov, sitting at a transmitter in the divisional commander's car, cut into our pilots' wave length and heard their conversation:

"Kostya, you've a Messer on your tail! . . ."

"Left, left, Vanya! . . . Chase him, the Junkers!"

Invisible "Kostyas" and "Vanyas" were protecting the infantry. Two German planes hurtled downwards, two streaks of raging fire, and the waters of the Oder to the left of the crossing swallowed them up. For a second the flames of the burning aircraft lighted up the pale faces of the soldiers and the dark flowing manes of the horses moving along the left pontoon bridge.

Soon the Divisional Commander and Lubentsov crossed over as well. Lubentsov accompanied the General

to the O.P., to the water mill where he had been yesterday. Plotnikov arrived there too. He went round all the regiments and had to return again to the east bank: there, in the Political Department, a conference of Company Party organizers was taking place.

"You come as well," he said to Lubentsov. "You can tell the Party organizers about the enemy. It would be useful to dispel any ideas the soldiers may have about the enemy being weak. Let them know about the divisions transferred here by Hitler from the western front and about the Germans' defence. That defence is strong," Plotnikov shook his head.

The Divisional Commander said, grimly:

"You are always after my scout! Look, he can hardly walk as it is! . . . All right, you may go this time, but make it the last."

Sereda and Lubentsov went out to accompany Plotnikov to his car. A misty morning hung over the bridgehead. The machine guns were chattering. The fragrance of apple blossom mingled with the burning smell of nearby fires.

One regiment had its headquarters in a dugout next to the O.P. The headquarters of another was nearby and next to it a third, belonging to the adjacent division. Twenty metres away from them the headquarters of two battalions were in the same place. From this crowding of headquarters one could tell that the infantry's battle formations were very compact.

Dark silhouettes of soldiers were moving in all directions.

Lubentsov called in at Major Migayev's headquarters. The latter was glad to see the divisional reconnaissance officer and showered him with questions:

"When will the offensive begin? Have they given us a sector already? Shall we be going straight to Berlin or to the north?"

After telling Migayev what was known, and hardly anything was known, Lubentsov asked:

"Captain Chokhov's in your regiment, isn't he?" In answer to Migayev's questioning glance he explained: "You see, it was he who got me out of the Schneidemühl mousetrap . . . a good lad!"

Migayev was silent, then said:

"We wanted to promote him to battalion commander but we're half afraid to. He's a crazy lad. So that's that. . . . Lately, though, he's changed a lot, left his carriage somewhere near Altdamm. . . ."

"Well, give that carriage a rest," laughed Lubentsov sadly. "I rode in it once myself. . . ."

Then Migayev remembered:

"I think Chokhov is somewhere nearby . . . getting reinforcements."

VII

Chokhov was nearby. At the foot of a low hill beside one of the numerous grabens he and Sergeant-Major Godunov were forming up their new soldiers before taking them to their company in the forward area.

"There's a major from Divisional Headquarters asking for you," they told him. "He's with the Chief of Staff."

"What do they want?" asked Chokhov.

As he came into the headquarters' cellar he saw Lubentsov and Migayev, and raising his hand to his cap reported:

"Captain Chokhov here by your order."

"It wasn't an order," said Lubentsov. "I just wanted to see you. If you don't mind, I'll combine pleasure with duty: we'll do some observing together from your observation post."

Chokhov was embarrassed, he dropped his hand and said:

"Gladly."

And they walked together at the head of the detachment of new soldiers. Sergeant-Major Godunov brought up the rear on the cart with the food supplies. Kablukov marched beside the cart. They moved across the boggy lowland, torn up by shells and dotted with ruined cottages, cowsheds and water mills.

Lubentsov, as observant as ever, noticed that Chokhov looked more mature and thinner, and that his eyes had become kindlier.

Chokhov watched the limping scout out of the corner of his eye. The Captain had thought of him only yesterday when some printed leaflets arrived for the company—a guide to the use of German faustpatrones. He knew that the leaflet was the work of the Guards Major.

I wonder if he is going with that woman-doctor?—thought Chokhov. For some reason he wanted the Guards Major to be going with her.

Behind them the new soldiers were whispering to each other. The wheels of Godunov's cart creaked.

"I heard you dropped that carriage somewhere?" asked Lubentsov.

"Near Altdamm."

"You did the right thing. It wasn't a proper means of transport...."

"It wasn't."

"Migayev told me that you..." began Lubentsov, but Chokhov frowned and immediately changed the subject.

"I heard you had taken a prisoner."

"That's so," and the Major told him about Fritz Armut and how the German had dropped a brick by greeting him with the Hitler salute.

Chokhov shook his head in surprise and said:

"They want some more bashing."

"It's only a matter of days now," laughed Lubentsov. Chokhov had to call in on the Battalion Commander,

who had taken up his position with his staff in the ruins of an old cowshed. Lubentsov waited for him on the road.

Veselchakov asked the Company Commander how many men he had been given.

"Sixty-five," answered Chokhov.

Veselchakov noted down the figure in his field notebook. He was smoking continually. Glasha had broken him of the smoking habit but now that Glasha was not here he had begun chain-smoking again.

He received letters from Glasha frequently but these letters were too cheerful by half, in his opinion. Glasha wrote that she was well, that she was pleased with everything and that everyone was pleased with her, the chief surgeon treated her especially well.

Glasha wrote like this because she wanted to reassure Veselchakov as to her fate, but it turned out the other way round: Veselchakov decided that Glasha was not even thinking of coming back to the battalion. Of course, in the Medical Battalion it was quieter and the men were more interesting than he—doctors. They were clever and clean, and Glasha liked cleanliness. Her frequent remarks about "the chief surgeon" seemed particularly suspicious to him.

Now he was beginning to think less about Glasha: he had been caught up in the general upsurge on the eve of the final battle of the war.

Reinforcements arrived in the battalion. Officers and messengers ran in from Regimental Headquarters. They were all feverishly excited.

Chokhov took leave of Veselchakov and went on with Lubentsov, to the forward area.

In the dugout where the command post of the company was situated four lieutenants sat round the radio, listening to music. They were new officers—Chokhov's assistant and three platoon commanders. At the sight of the unknown major they stood up.

Lubentsov listened to the music and asked:

"What station is that?"

"Berlin," replied one of the lieutenants.

Lubentsov's interest was awakened:

"Very interesting! We have already noticed that Berlin has begun to broadcast Beethoven, Bach and Schubert continually and the poetry of Goethe and Schiller. . . . Fascist songs and marches have almost entirely disappeared from the broadcasts. We, scouts, think there is something behind it. Hitler has remembered German culture. Wants to be its heir. Perhaps he thinks we'll find it awkward to hang such a bogus heir!"

The lieutenants were surprised: it had not occurred to them that behind this quiet piano music lay such an important political meaning. It was interesting for them to listen to the reconnaissance officer—in their out-of-the-way company they rarely saw "city folks," that is—divisional officers. However, the reinforcements had to be received and assigned to their platoons, and the officers left the dugout. Lubentsov and Chokhov went along the communication trench to the forward trench. German mortars were firing not far away, sometimes the guns barked—in a word, it was the usual morning "stillness" of the forward area. Far away to the west there was a glare on the horizon. Berlin was burning.

"Have you got field glasses with you?" asked Lubentsov.

Someone's hand stretched forward at once, holding binoculars. Lubentsov looked round. Kablukov was standing beside him. The binoculars were his own, Lubentsov's.

"Note the mine field there, straight in front of you," said Lubentsov after a silence. "And that village is a German strongpoint. It's well fortified."

"Sixty versts to Berlin," said Chokhov; for some reason he used the old Russian measure, instead of "kilometre." Then, suddenly he asked: "And did the prisoner tell you where Hitler is?"

"Apparently in Berlin," answered Lubentsov, still observing. "And Goebbels is there, he's definitely there, but it's not known yet where Himmler, Göring and Ribbentrop are."

After a minute's silence Chokhov asked very quietly: "You haven't a map of Berlin, have you? A spare one? For me?"

"There are a few. Yesterday I sent out two to each regimental commander. I can let you have one—for old times' sake, you know."

Chokhov said dryly:

"Thanks. If you can, give the map to my Party organizer, Senior Sergeant Slivenko, he's at the division Political Department now, at a Party organizers' meeting."

"Fine! I shall be with them today making a report about the enemy. I'll find Slivenko and give it to him."

After a minute Chokhov asked:

"How's the map done? In German or in Russian?"

"In Russian."

"And are the objectives shown?"

"Which?"

After a slight pause Chokhov answered hurriedly:

"The Reichstag and government buildings."

Lubentsov lowered his binoculars and only his eyes betrayed a smile.

"Everything's written there. If you like I'll mark those buildings in red pencil. But for the moment, put down the mine field and flanking machine guns on your own map. . . ."

They fell silent but in this silence it suddenly dawned on them where they were and what lay ahead of them. And at once all personal matters dropped away from them and forgotten were the deep yearning for a beloved woman and the pain of real and imaginary humiliations and unfulfilled hopes. The solemn meaning of what was hap-

pening overwhelmed them and they looked at each other with wiser eyes. It had been worth living for this moment! It had been worth enduring grief and hardship in order to stand here at this moment, in this trench on the near approaches to Berlin and feel oneself a part of those immense, as yet unleashed forces, a part of the motherland, Russia, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics!

They both wanted to get down to something. There must be something that needed attention, something else that needed planning. Lubentsov thought: I must talk to the scouts again, Oganessian must be told how to question local inhabitants, I must find out whether the commanders of lower units have the information about the enemy; perhaps we shall have to besiege Berlin and the Schneidemühl experience will come in useful—that experience must be summarized. Chokhov was thinking that he must talk to the new soldiers, explain the situation to them, obtain gun-oil, check the machine guns, improve contact with the artillery.

The men who had come as the fresh reinforcement were standing about the trench. They were staring over the parapet at the German positions and talking to each other quietly, still unable to get used to the idea of being so close to Berlin.

"Terrific!..." said one of the new men, a tall broad-shouldered soldier.

Another said thoughtfully:

"Well, the war has brought us to an out-of-the-way place, right as far as Berlin! Must be at least four thousand kilometres odd from home!"

"And where are you from?" asked someone.

"I'm from the Volga," answered the soldier.

Lubentsov smiled and paused to hear if anybody would laugh. No one did. He said good-bye and went to the O.P.

VIII

The Party organizers' meeting began in the morning, about three hours after the night crossing and the assembling of the troops in the forest. Men from all companies and batteries assembled in a hunting box that had belonged to a rich German bourgeois. It was not far from the tar works where Divisional Headquarters was situated. Major Garin received them and marked the roll.

The Party organizers came in detachments, fully equipped, wearing helmets, carrying sub-machine guns or rifles and even spoons.

The Party organizers were ordinary soldiers and sergeants. But an attentive observer might notice in their confident movements, in their clear and calm gaze, something that distinguished them from ordinary soldiers. They were the cream of the infantry and artillerymen. There was no mistaking them: these men were accustomed not to give orders but to understand and explain. Although they were the same as all the other soldiers and did not enjoy any special privileges, they felt that on them lay an additional responsibility: they were representatives of the Bolshevik Party—perhaps they were not Party leaders on a big scale but they were, nevertheless, leaders. And it was not enough for them just to fight well and, if need be, to die—they had to instill in their comrades a strong fighting spirit. They were the very tips of the nerves running through the whole organism of the army. Weak and unsuitable men, if such men appeared, were unable to stay long in this post which, at first glance, seemed so unimposing. In a company, the suitability of a man for the work of Party organizer comes out almost immediately: under fire, among continuous and extreme dangers, where a man at times has hardly strength enough to answer for himself—only a very few can

encourage everybody and answer for all. It was these few, who had assembled in the German hunting box.

Colonel Plotnikov began the proceedings with a report on the international situation and then Garin delivered a lecture about Party work and the tasks of company Party organizers. The meeting was adjourned in the evening. The Party organizers left for their own units, which were beginning to proceed across the Oder. In the morning they returned to the hunting box.

The second day's work began.

The Party organizers made speeches to their comrades and told about their experience at work. Plotnikov wrote down in his field notebook the most interesting things.

Then the division's reconnaissance officer Lubentsov told the Party organizers about the situation in the enemy camp, emphasizing the harmfulness of the opinion, prevalent among the soldiers, that the battles ahead would be easy.

True, the Hitlerite High Command was in a panic; Himmler had been dismissed from the command of the Army Group, but all this did not mean that the fascists had laid down their arms.

The Major told of the Germans' feverish building of defences and of the strong forces which had been rushed up to the Oder, in particular the 606th Special Duty Division and the motorized SS Division "Führer."

The Party organizers carefully wrote everything down on their pads and notebooks. Suddenly Plotnikov stiffened: blasts of a motor horn were heard and a car, followed by an armoured troop carrier, drew up at the hunting box.

Plotnikov stood up. The door flew open and General Sizokrylov appeared on the threshold. He looked the assembly over. Sub-machine guns, rifles and carbines stood against chairs and couches beside each Party organizer.

The General greeted them.

"Good day, Comrade General!" shouted the soldiers distinctly in reply.

They all sat down and the General began to speak.

The member of the Military Council met Slivenko's attentive gaze and noticed such deep understanding and alertness in the Senior Sergeant's eyes that he continued looking at him, as if he were addressing him alone.

"Our imminent victory," said Sizokrylov, "is the clearest confirmation of the might of the Soviet system. It is proof that a just and progressive cause is invincible. Many were the enemies who wished to hamper the building of the new life in our country. There was no weapon, no villainy which they would hesitate to employ against our state. They erected 'sanitary cordons' round us, they lay in wait for our men at every step. Finally, in the country where we are now, they smashed the organizations of the working class, and on the twenty-second of June 1941 the black hordes swarmed on to our peaceful land.

"Do not think that fascism is the offspring of German imperialism alone. Fascism is the most recent outcome of capitalism, in general, arising out of its fear of the communist strivings of the masses. Fascism is the striking force of decaying capitalism, its last attempt to remain in being.

"Our victory is proof that against the aggressive forces of oppression and tyranny stands a mighty, invincible and real force. Not only a just idea, but a real force!

"This force was created by our Party, the Party of Lenin and Stalin, which has reared and educated us. Glory to that Party!

"The idea of communism has become part of the flesh and blood of our people. It has won its own home—land, mines, factories and laboratories. The great Soviet edifice is rising on one sixth of the globe. And you and I

are the masters of this house. Are we managing it well? Yes, we are, for if it were not so, we should not be here. Is this edifice firm? Is it strong? Yes, it is, firm and strong, or else we should not have been able to make our way through such battles to the fascist capital.

"Communism has become a mighty force, and now there is every reason to believe that it will triumph on the earth.

"... We shall not hide the fact that we are proud that the prophecies of brilliant minds about the great future of Russia have been realized, that at the present time all that is most progressive speaks in the Russian language, the language of Lenin and Stalin, Pushkin, Belinsky and Tolstoy....

"... The building of communism after victory will continue with tenfold strength. The advantages of our form of state will yet again surprise the whole world. You and I, the pupils of the Party, the soldiers of Stalin, are the guarantee of this...."

With a gesture of his hand the member of the Military Council stopped the ovation as it began, and then concluded:

"Allow me to share with you a military secret. The offensive on Berlin begins tomorrow."

These words aroused a storm. Enthusiastic cries rang out. The soldiers' hard hands clapped wildly. Men going tomorrow perhaps to their death, welcomed the battle order as the expression of the greatest wisdom and greatest meaning.

Colonel Plotnikov said in a voice full of emotion:

"In view of the coming offensive the meeting is closed."

For a few moments Sizokrylov watched the soldiers, who had already formed ranks.

"The last battle is beginning," he said, "tomorrow you will hear an artillery barrage the like of which has

not been known in the history of war. On the order of Comrade Stalin unheard-of masses of weapons and equipment have been concentrated here." He shook Plotnikov's hand: "I wish you success. You will receive the Military Council's proclamation to the troops today. Well, what else?" Then he repeated: "I wish you success."

He walked towards his car. The soldiers of his body-guard jumped hurriedly into the armoured troop carrier. The cars soon disappeared into the forest.

IX

Lubentsov almost forgot the promise he had made to Chokhov. When the member of the Military Council left, the Major remembered the map of Berlin lying in his field bag.

He went to look for Senior Sergeant Slivenko, whose face he remembered well from Schneidemühl times.

Meanwhile, Slivenko was waiting for the meeting of the divisional Party Commission to begin. Three soldiers of his company—Godunov, Semiglav and Gogoberidze—were to be admitted to the Party today.

They had already arrived and were sitting in the shadow of a thick fir tree. Next to them sat soldiers of other companies, who had come for the same purpose.

All three were deeply moved.

The arrival of General Sizokrylov added to their worries: surely the member of the Military Council would not be present when they were admitted to the Party? They were disturbed because they were not used to speaking in public, and here it would be necessary—Slivenko had warned them of this—to recount their biography and, perhaps, to answer political questions.

Strange as it may seem, it was Semiglav who was most disturbed, although in the company he was con-

sidered the best speaker and he understood political questions very well. But Gogoberidze was also disturbed, and all the more so because even the cunning and fearless Sergeant-Major was coughing suspiciously, standing up and sitting down again. And suddenly he thought of treating them to tinned meat, but himself ate nothing, although he was a great eater.

At last Slivenko appeared and warned them that the meeting was about to begin.

It was here, by the fir trees, that Lubentsov found the Party organizer. He handed him a map of Berlin, scale 1:10,000, to give to Chokhov.

Another time Lubentsov would not have denied himself the pleasure of a chat with this sensible and clever sergeant whom he liked very much. But there was no time for talking now, and the Major hurried back to Plotnikov, who was waiting for him, in order to return as soon as possible to the bridgehead.

Slivenko with his three men walked towards the hunting box, where the members of the Party Commission had already assembled.

Fortunately their fears concerning the member of the Military Council proved to be unfounded: the General had left. Unfamiliar officers were sitting round the table. There were five of them: one major and four captains.

The presiding Major had kindly eyes with wrinkles round them, but they were rather sharp too, and even a little mocking.

Slivenko was almost as disturbed as his men. He had given them a long and unhurried preparation for entering the Party. During quiet spells he had read them the Party rules and the speeches and orders of Stalin, had given them thorough tests and watched them with friendly but persistent care. He had, as he put it, "a hankering" for making the whole company communist. True,

the arrival of the reinforcements had ruined his plans but here he yielded to military necessity.

In any case, the meeting of the Party Commission was a serious test for him too. He was glad that three of his comrades would be admitted today, on the eve of the offensive, to the Party of Bolsheviks. After all, a Party organizer's work under front-line conditions was beset with special difficulties. It was not the same as in the mine, where Slivenko had worked as the Party organizer of his shift. There the people were permanent, but here. . . .

He remembered the two Ivanovs—a soldier and a sergeant,—whom he had prepared for the Party before the advance on Warsaw. They were fine men, but both of them had been killed in the break-through.

Slivenko pricked up his ears on hearing the Major's voice:

"Next—Corporal Semiglav."

Semiglav went in.

His biography was so touchingly short, that it aroused sympathetic smiles from those present.

"I was born in '24," he said, "my father was a mechanic in the town of Tula. In '39 I completed seven years at school, from there I went to a factory where I worked as a mechanic. In '44 I was called up into the Red Army. In the Komsomol since '39."

He strove for all he was worth to add something more but could not remember anything else. His decorations—two medals—were mentioned in the questionnaire which had been read out earlier, and these medals were hanging on his chest. They were not the kind of decorations which do not show why they have been awarded. On the medals was written in red on white: For Valour.

Semiglav was asked a few questions, which he answered, to Slivenko's satisfaction, correctly and well.

Then Semiglav grew thoughtful. He did not know if it was worth telling about his one military sin. Last year

he had lost his respirator. The soldiers had been digging dugouts for themselves, and he had put the respirator on a tree stump. It had disappeared. True, that night they had been thrown into battle, everyone had forgotten about the respirator but he had managed to get another—he had taken it from a dead man. Not the proper thing to do really.

Nobody could call it a crime and Semiglav's conscience had never troubled him about it, but here, in the big room filled with members of the Party, under the attentive eye of the chairman, last year's incident of the respirator seemed to Semiglav not so unimportant and very unbecoming. Besides, it seemed to him that these men, and particularly the chairman, guessed—even knew definitely—about his offence, and that was why they were studying him so keenly.

He blushed to the roots of his hair and related the incident.

"Well, then, Comrade Semiglav," said the chairman, "you may leave for the moment."

Semiglav went out and said in a constrained voice to Gogoberidze:

"Go in, they are calling for you."

He himself sat down on the grass, terribly upset and quite certain that he had not been admitted to the Party.

Gogoberidze went into the room. Slivenko nodded encouragingly to him.

The chairman looked at Gogoberidze, at his broad chest decorated with Orders and medals, and thought how strange it was that men who did not tremble in the face of death, heroes, most definitely heroes, should be so confused in front of him, the secretary of a Party Commission, a short, thin, unmilitary person.

This confusion of theirs especially pleased the Major: it showed that the men had a feeling of responsibility to their own conscience and were aware that this was an

examination for the highest title—that of an advanced man of one's time. And it is good, thought the Major, that they feel you may qualify as a hero, as a fine soldier, as a skilful commander, but that does not mean at all that you have qualified as an advanced man, as a leader of the people. And, finally, it is excellent that people understand that to belong to the Party means you must be the best among your comrades; to be admitted to its ranks means that your qualities become generally acknowledged.

These thoughts ran through the Major's head when he looked into Gogoberidze's burning eyes and listened to the quiet, shy answers of this man, who was obviously not shy and at ordinary times undoubtedly bold and spirited. And the secretary of the Party Commission through whose hands passed the most varied affairs of Party members thought how important it was that there should be no one in the Party disgracing the title of Communist—important for this brave Georgian and for millions like him.

Finally they called in Sergeant-Major Godunov. The Sergeant-Major, as a man accustomed to command, conducted himself more boldly. He told about his life, which had been the life of the collective farm Lenin's Path, of the Altai region. Godunov had worked as a kolkhoz brigade leader, and his brigade was considered outstanding in the kolkhoz and one of the best in the district.

All that was good, but during his service as Sergeant-Major, Godunov, the sly fellow, had stained his conscience slightly: sometimes, to his shame, he would deceive the supply chiefs about the number of men in his company, in order to get more supplies. He, of course, realized that the members of the Party Commission could not know about this. He was not so simple as Semiglav, although he did find the keen eyes of the secretary of the Party Commission somewhat confusing. He even admitted

to himself that he really ought to tell about his sins, but he did not want to suffer the disgrace.

So he decided he would not tell but promised, and, to be sure, the promise of a Godunov was a true promise, he thought, mentally addressing the members of the Party Commission, that such a thing would never happen to him again.

Many other people, quite different in biography, character and appearance, went before the Party Commission on that night before the offensive. Among them there was a man guilty of a very serious offence, such an offence that if it were known he would never be admitted into the Party. But this man thought: And who will find out? Who have I to be afraid of?

However, when he saw the calm people sitting here and heard the tense silence reigning in the room and the quiet voice of the chairman, this man suddenly realized clearly: it will come out, if not now, then in a year, in two years, but it will, all the same. And bathed in sweat, he answered the questions, but his heart yearned to be away, outside, somewhere in the darkness, far away from this bright light.

At last Slivenko came out to his men and said wearily: "Well lads, congratulations."

"What, have they accepted me too?" asked Semiglav, his spirits rising at once.

"All three."

"And when shall we receive our Party cards?"

"Oho, you've forgotten the rules already!"—laughed Slivenko. "You've a long way to go before you get your Party card. You'll receive a candidate's card. Tonight they will bring them from the Political Department. Let's go home!"—After thinking, he added, dropping his voice to a whisper: "Since you are Communists now, I can tell you a military secret: the offensive starts tomorrow."

And the new Communists went "home," to the front line, happy but unusually dignified.

The German artillery was raging at the crossing. They had to wait in a slit trench on the bank until the barrage ceased. One shell hit the bridge and the sappers, illuminated by the blazing light of the fire, fought the flames. There was enough water and the fire was quickly extinguished. Emergency squads crawled hurriedly to the breakdown, with axes and boards. Men swarmed under the bridge like ants, on rafts and boats, reinforcing the piles.

Seven dead were carried back from the crossing on stretchers covered with waterproof capes. Slivenko and the others took off their caps, sighed and went towards the bridge.

At that moment a stout Lieutenant-General accompanied by two officers strode briskly up to the wooden planking. The soldiers saluted respectfully and stopped to make way for him.

"Where's the chief of the crossing?" asked the Lieutenant-General loudly.

The sapper officers standing nearby began to make hurried inquiries, someone ran into a slit trench on the left and soon a short, thin, unshaven Major-General dashed up. He raised a frail hand to his cap and introduced himself:

"Chief of the crossing, Major-General of Engineers, Chaikin."

The Lieutenant-General greeted him and said:

"I must talk to you."

"What can I do for you?" asked the chief, not at all in military fashion.

But the Lieutenant-General remained silent, and the chief of the crossing, understanding his silence, waved his hand reassuringly: "No strangers here, they are all sapper officers."

Then the Lieutenant-General said:

"The Marshal has given orders for the artillery to be transferred to the other bank in the near future."

"They've already told me about that by telephone. How many guns?"

"Sixteen thousand."

After a minute's pause General Chaikin asked slowly:

"Did I hear you say. . . ."

"Sixteen thousand," repeated the Lieutenant-General.

The Major-General, delighted with the gigantic figure, said:

"Good. Good. Let's go to my dugout. Tell me the weight of the guns and I will indicate the crossing points. . . ."

They walked away and were soon swallowed up in the darkness of the night.

"Did you hear that?" said Slivenko.

His heart was beating fast.

X

General Sereda, who had just received the order about the offensive, was with his staff officers and artillerymen at the front line, in the forward trench. He was making a reconnaissance check. He walked unhurriedly along the divisional front from north to south, studying the German positions and deciding with the commanders of the attached units upon combined tasks and signals for concerted action.

The division's sector of attack was very narrow and the units were bunched close together. The whole bridge-head, crammed with troops, was like a compressed spring ready to burst out upon those hidden enemy positions waiting out there in the darkness.

On the way back the General met Major Garin in the communication trench. The Major was carrying several rolled papers in his hand.

"What have you got there?" asked the General.

"The Military Council's proclamation."

The General took one from Garin's hands and, leaning his elbows on the wall of the communication trench, read it through slowly. Then he put the sheet into his pocket and walked on quickly.

All the soldiers and officers they met on the way had such sheets of paper in their hands. Not far away someone was reading the proclamation aloud, reading with difficulty, almost syllable by syllable: it was beginning to grow dark.

Plotnikov and Lubentsov were already waiting for the General at the observation post. Meshchersky, Nikolsky, artillerymen and signallers were also there. By the light of an improvised lamp someone was reading the proclamation.

The General went up to Plotnikov, embraced him, kissed him and said:

"And so, Pavel Ivanovich, my dear friend, we are finishing this war."

He embraced and kissed Lubentsov too, and then asked:

"Has the air liaison officer come?"

The airman arrived ten minutes later. He was accompanied by two men with a radio set. After greeting everybody the airman immediately got in touch with his headquarters. With a lazy smile he asked:

"Well, how are you there? Life still stirring?"

The distant listener answered that life was stirring.

"Thank God," the airman praised the Lord over the ether. "I'm on the spot already. I've made contact. Be ready to receive all the time."

Later a major—the secretary of the Party Commission—arrived with the minutes of that day's meeting. The Political Department had already drawn up the Party documents and Colonel Plotnikov set off for the front line to present them. The telephone buzzed unceasingly. Units, rear detachments, ordnance, the Medical Battalion were reporting their readiness to the Commander of the Division.

Then for a time everything grew quiet. The Divisional Commander, who had been looking fixedly at the map lying before him on the table, raised his eyes and saw Lubentsov seated in the corner.

Suddenly the General winked and beckoned to Lubentsov. When Lubentsov came up, the General asked:

"And have you been to see her at all?"

Encountering the Major's puzzled glance, the General said kindly:

"Now then, don't pretend! You think I don't know? And he goes on pretending!... I really did think you had only reconnaissance on your mind."

Although Lubentsov had no idea what the General meant, he blushed slightly and the General, noticing his confusion, regretted his rather gruff frankness.

"Well, all right, all right," he said. "Sorry if I touched you on the raw, I shan't keep on!... But I liked her. And I know people.... I wanted to arrange the match. But that's up to you.... I shan't say any more."

"Whom are you talking about?" asked the scout, a little angrily.

Then the General realized that Lubentsov was really surprised, and was himself taken aback.

"You don't mean to say you haven't met each other yet?"

He told Lubentsov about Tanya's visit, not giving her name, because he did not know what her name was. Then he was silent, thought for a minute, stood up suddenly and exclaimed:

"My dear chap, but the poor girl is still sure you are dead!" He struck himself on the forehead and said reproachfully: "That is bad!"

The telephone rang. The General picked up the receiver.

"One hundred and one wants to speak to you," said a woman's distant voice.

The General looked hurriedly at the new table of call signs—it had been changed for the offensive—and at once became serious: one hundred and one was the Commander of the Front.

The Divisional Commander reported to the Marshal that everything was ready, and again began to call up his own regiments and artillery units.

As he talked on the telephone the General occasionally looked at the silent and resigned Lubentsov standing thoughtfully by the window where the telescope was fixed.

The General smiled and putting down the receiver, said:

"You ought to have seen her face when I told her about you! She went so pale I thought she was going to faint. You ought to go and see her at the first opportunity. And apologize to her from me for my loose tongue, which showed such lack of faith in my scout."

Lubentsov left the cellar. It was dark, warm and windy. Nearby one gallant nightingale, which had remained on the bridgehead, was singing.

In the darkness near the entrance to the cellar someone stirred.

"Who's that?" asked Lubentsov.

"It's me."

"Oh, you?" Lubentsov recognized Kablukov. "Where are the horses?"

"I put them in the hollow."

"You should go and sleep. What are you doing here?"

"With you," replied Kablukov.

This quiet answer embarrassed the Major. Looking intently at the Corporal, he asked:

"Where are you from?"

"From Ulyanovsk."

"The offensive starts tomorrow, do you know?"

"I know."

"Glad?"

"Yes."

"Have you any parents?"

"A mother."

"And father?"

"Killed."

"Got a sweetheart?"

A pause, then Kablukov answered:

"Kind of."

That nightingale ought to fly away from here while it can, thought Lubentsov listening to its song.

"Where are the scouts?"

"Over there."

"Come along."

They went along the communication trench and soon heard the voices of the scouts. They were sitting in the communication trench, smoking and chatting quietly.

"But at home no one would guess," came Mitrokhin's voice, "where I am now. . . . What do they know? Field postal number and that's all."

"And about there being an offensive on Berlin tomorrow," it was Gushchin's voice, "they wouldn't guess that in a month of Sundays. They are all asleep and dreaming now. Only Stalin knows such a military secret as that."

"Stalin is not asleep," said Meshchersky. "I am sure he is thinking about us. Absolutely sure."

"Now, I wonder," said Mitrokhin, "when Comrade Stalin, way back in '41, spoke on the radio and said then

that victory would be ours. . . . Did he know that or was it just to give us heart?"

"He knew," came Voronin's voice. "He's got everything figured out. He had worked it all out: economically and militarily. And of course, it was to give us heart too. Because we did not know then!"

After a fairly long silence Meshchersky said:

"During the war I have thought of him very much. When we were retreating my heart ached for him. I wanted to see him, just for a minute, and tell him not to worry, that we would do everything, everything. . . . I dreamt about him many times."

"So did I," rejoined Voronin and giving a short, excited laugh, ended forcefully: "Who could have thought then that we should get to Berlin? He, only he knew it, no one else. . . ."

Lubentsov walked closer and asked Meshchersky:

"Are the reconnaissance parties in position?"

"Yes," said Meshchersky, standing up.

"I advise you to go to the ditch and wash your feet," said Lubentsov. "There'll be a lot of marching tomorrow."

The soldiers took off their boots and went along to the next graben. Guns, covered with branches, were mounted beside it. Their long thin barrels and the slots of the muzzle brakes were clearly outlined against the sky.

Lubentsov heard Mitrokhin's voice saying jokingly:

"Chock-full of guns! More than men! You daren't even stand up in case the blasted thing goes and fires—and then your poor noddle. . . ."

German planes were roaring overhead somewhere very high up.

"They have dropped leaflets!" Lubentsov heard Meshchersky shout.

Soon Meshchersky dashed up out of the darkness with a leaflet in his hand.

"Is that you, Comrade Major of the Guards?" he asked.

He offered Lubentsov the leaflet. Lubentsov crouched down in the bottom of the trench, struck a match and burst out laughing.

He was not the only one who laughed. The leaflets made the whole forward area roar with laughter. They said: "Come over to our side!" The password for crossing the front was given. "We guarantee deserters their life, good food and medical aid."

They were no other than the leaflets of 1941 which had been prepared then in millions of copies.

Now these surplus goods were being dumped on the Oder, sixty kilometres from the German capital, on the night of the 16th of April 1945!

Our soldiers' laughter even reached the ears of the Germans who decided not to take any chances and opened fire with their machine guns.

Half an hour later, in addition to this ridiculous leaflet, Meshchersky found another one, in German. Apparently these had been destined for the Germans but the distance had been badly calculated and they had fallen on to our positions as well. It was the Goebbels proclamation to the soldiers of the 9th Army.

"Soldiers of the 9th Army," wrote Goebbels, "after visiting your commander I bring to Berlin the conviction that the defence of the Fatherland from the steppe monsters of the East has been taken over by the best soldiers in Germany...."

Lubentsov went back to the O.P. in the water mill. Plotnikov had already returned from the regiments and was sitting there. The Divisional Commander was still bent over the map, muttering something to himself and at times glancing at his watch.

After reading Goebbels' proclamation Colonel Plotnikov smiled, also looked at his watch and, growing seri-

ous, addressed the General, Lubentsov, Meshchersky, Nikolsky and all the others present:

"Well, 'steppe monsters of the East,' we begin in thirty minutes."

XI

The artillery barrage crashed out at five o'clock in the morning. It shook the whole bridgehead. When one's ears had grown a little accustomed to the roar, one could distinguish through the general pandemonium the grunting bass voices of the heavy artillery—the High Command's reserve. Lightning from the "Katyushas" flashed across the sky.

A thousand score guns, howitzers and mortars were roaring unhurriedly, masterfully, persistently. The area was covered with a shroud of purple grey.

The soldiers stood upright in the trenches and listened in awed silence to the fantastic roar. There were veterans here who had heard the Stalingrad and Kursk cannonades, but what they heard now stood no comparison with anything.

Before the artillery barrage was over Colonel Plotnikov came to see the soldiers of the left-flank regiment who had been ordered by the Divisional Commander to make the main attack. He ordered them to carry the regiment's banner forward. The standard-bearer, a sergeant with a dozen medals on his chest, climbed on to the parapet. And since he knew that behind him his men were watching him and that in front, perhaps, an enemy spared by the shells was aiming at him, he stood tense and upright, solemnly still, like a carved image.

Colonel Plotnikov climbed up on to the parapet after him. There was nothing solemn in his appearance. He walked nervously up and down, shielding his eyes with

his hand from time to time and striving to make out something in the purple-grey smoke lying ahead.

He had come here to rouse the men for the attack. As he walked along the trench and saw the warm scarlet of the banner against the background of dense smoke he realized that there was no need for speeches. Men who had fought over thousands of kilometres, who four years ago had been called to battle for their Motherland, who had endured wounds, cold, heat, who had dragged their boots over ice and marsh—needed no words of encouragement now.

Then the shellbursts moved further away and Plotnikov, who knew the schedule of the artillery barrage, realized that the guns were now firing in depth. He turned to the soldiers and said in a simple, matter-of-fact voice:

“Time to go?”

And the soldiers went. Soon they were lost in the swirling smoke. Only from time to time did the banner appear in the haze and vanish again.

Plotnikov returned to the O.P. Here the atmosphere was extremely tense but no one spoke loudly. They were awaiting developments. Finally the General ordered Nikolsky to call up Chetverikov and said into the receiver in a calm voice:

“Report the situation.”

“The first trench has been taken,” Chetverikov’s voice was hoarse, “I am fighting for the second.”

The General called up the right-flank regiment. Colonel Semyonov reported:

“Broken into the first trench. Giesshof—Merin—Graben is still resisting.”

“Carry out your task!” said the Divisional Commander. “Carry out your task, do you hear?”

After fifteen minutes the General again called up Semyonov and suddenly, unable to maintain his quiet tone, shouted loudly:

"Why all the chatter? Take the village!"

But when he had heard what Semyonov had to say, the General turned his head to the air officer who was sitting on his haunches beside his transmitter and said:

"Semyonov! 'Birds' will be flying up in a moment. Indicate your forward area."

The air officer looked at his map, grumbling:

"What square's it in? Aha! . . . I see! Merin! . . ."

He said something into the mouthpiece and at once went out of the cellar to watch. In a few minutes stormoviks appeared in the sky. With a satisfied smile the air officer waved his hand to them and went back to the Divisional Commander.

Bombs exploded not far away. Semyonov called up the Divisional Commander and said:

"We are on our way."

"Bud"! . . . "Bud"! . . . "Bud"! . . . shouted a telephone operator.

"Amber"! . . . "Amber"! . . . "Amber"! . . . shouted another.

"Fly"! . . . "Fly"! . . . "Fly"! . . . screamed the wireless operator.

"This is 'Eye'! . . . This is 'Eye'! . . . This is 'Eye'!" growled another.

One of the telephone operators brightened up.

"Comrade General, they have taken that Merin."

"Who is speaking?"

"I don't know."

The General called up Semyonov again.

"Taken half the village," Semyonov reported. "But there's an enemy machine gun on the flank, in the sector of the unit on our right."

The General called up his right-hand neighbour. Colonel Vorobyov's division was attacking on the right.

When the General got through to the Divisional Commander, he said sweetly:

"Sereda speaking. Why are you doing so badly? There are machine guns in your sector giving flanking fire on my right . . . rather unpleasant, neighbour dear! . . . Somewhat unneighbourly! . . ."

As soon as he recognized who was speaking Vorobyov's distant voice turned to honey:

"But that right flank of yours is lagging behind! . . . Here am I with my left flank exposed because of your right! . . . I'm suffering losses. You might chase up that Semyonov of yours."

The General, black as thunder, put down the receiver and shouted:

"Have Chetverikov turn his right battalion towards the north and help Semyonov!" He picked up the receiver and again called up Semyonov. "Semyonov," he said, "perhaps you are tired? You don't want to command? Well, I can replace you."

"Comrade General . . ." began Semyonov.

"I'll send someone else!" the General interrupted him. "I've some good fighting men in mind. Semyonov, carry out your task! In fifteen minutes' time report to me that you have taken the village! I'm ashamed before a neighbour!"

In a quarter of an hour Semyonov reported that he had taken the wretched village. To justify himself he told the Divisional Commander how the whole village had been crammed with armoured pillboxes and tanks dug into the earth.

Messengers arrived from the patrolling reconnaissance parties.

The first German position had been taken. In places, our units had advanced as far as the railway and straddled it. But the railway was the beginning of the second defensive position. The high embankment fortified with machine-gun nests was a serious obstacle.

The General climbed out of the cellar and walked in the direction of the Oder. Tanks were standing there, camouflaged with branches.

A Lieutenant-Colonel of tanks with a black suède helmet in his hand sat on the bank, smoking. On seeing the General he threw down his cigarette, crushed it with his boot and stood up.

The General approached rather slowly. He glanced towards the tanks and stopped at a distance. The Lieutenant-Colonel walked up to him. Mischievous sparks shone in the eyes of the tankman.

"Our turn?" he asked.

"It seems like it," said the General.

The Lieutenant-Colonel put on his helmet.

"Act decisively," said the General. "There's a platoon of sappers waiting for you on the eastern edge of the Giesshof-Merin-Graben. They will go with you."

Buttoning up his helmet the Lieutenant-Colonel said: "I hope the infantry won't lag behind."

The General walked back.

A group of prisoners went past. Dazed and crushed they stared at the ground not believing that they were still alive after what they had been through.

Lorries carrying artillery were coming towards them, crossing over to new firing positions, nearer to the enemy.

Wounded men appeared slowly out of the smoke. They moved in a line, as if they were still attacking. Noticing the General, those of them whose right hand was intact, saluted.

One said:

"Best of luck, Comrade General."

Another, smiling, said:

"When you get to Berlin, Comrade General, remember us.... Maybe you remember me: I'm Maiboroda, a sub-machine gunner. I went into attack with you once."

The General did not remember, but said:

"I remember."

The wounded men went on slowly and soon disappeared from view.

When the General returned to the O.P. Lubentsov reported to him that enemy artillery was shelling heavily from the station platform at Borehard and from the village of Eichwerder. The railway had been cut south of Borehard, but on other sectors the enemy was holding it firmly.

"Where are the tanks?" asked the Divisional Commander.

The liaison officer from the tank unit said:

"At the line of departure."

The General turned to the air officer:

"Prepare the way for them, eh?"

"Why not?" said the air officer.

They both bent over the map, after which the airman sat down at his transmitter and began to call up:

"Fly"! "Fly"! "Fly"!

The General rang up the Corps Commander and asked to be allowed to change the position of his O.P.

The Corps Commander granted permission. The staff of the observation post went on foot. Cars and horses followed behind.

This time Lubentsov's choice was a windmill, which though badly damaged was still standing. Everything that still held together somehow after the artillery barrage aroused genuine surprise.

"A tough windmill," said Voronin.

The scouts fixed the telescope at the spot where the windmill sails had once crossed. Now there were no sails; they lay in fine splinters on the ground.

The smoke had already cleared a little, and the railway embankment was visible through the telescope. Artillery fire nearby shook the windmill; the roar of the guns, which had subsided a little, was now growing

again. Lieutenant-Colonel Sizykh wedged his big belly among the upper beams of the windmill and started telephoning orders "to the barrels."

The Divisional Commander was peering through the telescope. The air liaison officer with his transmitter and men lay down below on the grass near a huge shell-crater, bellowing to the Divisional Commander from time to time:

"Need any 'birds'?"

"The tanks are on their way," said the General quietly and turned to Nikolsky: "Get me Chetverikov."

Migayev answered, and Nikolsky handed the receiver to the General.

"Migayev," said the Divisional Commander, "the 'boxes' will be going through your sector now. Follow them closely. Understand? Closely."

He left the telescope and crawled up to a tankman, the representative from the tank regiment. Looking at his watch he said:

"It's now twenty minutes to eleven. What does yours say?"

The tankman's watch said the same.

"The attack will begin at eleven. We shall get the enemy into shape with stormoviks—and then you will go in. Send that." To the air officer he shouted: "Call up! Check your watch! Finish the bombing by eleven, not a minute later or you'll give your own men a packet! Get me Chetverikov," he turned again to Nikolsky, and then gave the commander of the regiment an order that the front line must identify itself by a known signal—for the aircraft.

Another telephone rang, to say that the Germans were counterattacking Semyonov's regiment.

"No one else is being counterattacked, only Semyonov," raged the General.

Semyonov was being counterattacked by a battalion of infantry and ten tanks.

"Carry out your task!" said the Divisional Commander in separate syllables.

"Air!" shouted someone from below, and simultaneously twenty German bombers appeared in the sky.

Bombs exploded not far off.

"They have come to, the snakes," said the Divisional Commander.

Anti-aircraft guns let fly all round; heavy-calibre pom-poms mounted in a nearby hollow burst into a deafening roar.

"If only the Junkers don't spoil our tank attack," said the Divisional Commander looking at the sky.

Then another group of German bombers appeared but at the same time Soviet fighters dived out of the billowing white clouds. The sky echoed with machine-gun bursts and the whine of engines.

"Pheasant"! "Pheasant"! "Pheasant"! shouted a telephone operator.

"Amber"! "Amber"! "Amber"! shouted a second.

The first-aid men carried wounded past the windmill.

"Throw the Third Regiment into action?" asked Plotnikov in a whisper.

"It's early yet," said the Divisional Commander. "We'll take the second position, then perhaps...."

The second and third positions were taken at midday by a combined action of planes, infantry and tanks. The sun was very hot. The men were pouring with sweat. Continuous battle for seven hours had exhausted them all, but there seemed to be no sign of a rest in the offing: ahead, skirting the low hills and narrow canals, they could already see the second defence line—a powerful, triple-trench line with mine fields.

At twelve o'clock Semyonov's regiment rang up. The Divisional Commander listened attentively and was about to say something in reply but at that moment the Corps

Commander telephoned, ordering them to take the second defence line at all costs.

"Yes," said the Divisional Commander. After a pause he added: "They've just told me Semyonov has been fatally wounded." He listened for a minute to what the Corps Commander was telling him, then rang off, rose, put on his cap and turned to Plotnikov: "Come on, Pavel Ivanovich, let's say good-bye to a comrade. I've been bawling at him nearly all day, at a man about to die!"

A tear rolled slowly down the Divisional Commander's cheek; he angrily wiped it away and said loudly:

"Well, forward!... Signallers, bring up the line. And be sure it works. We've learnt to fight, anyway."

XII

The roar of the artillery barrage shaking the surrounding district awakened Tanya, who was sleeping in a little cottage a few kilometres from the front.

"Glasha, dear!" she began to rouse the nurse who was sleeping in the next bed. "It's started! Get up!"

Glasha jumped up and listened. Then suddenly she took Tanya in her powerful arms, hugged her, kissed her, let her go for a moment then again embraced her. And so they sat half-dressed, with joyful and frightened eyes, listening to the indescribable, almost unearthly roar. It was thus that Maria Nikolayevna Levkoyeva found them when she ran into the room.

"Dress yourselves, dress yourselves!" she began singing, to the tune of the "Toreador." "The battle's begun! On to Berlin!"

She threw open the window.

People were running about the village. There were glimpses of the white smocks of the nurses. Somewhere Rutkovsky's voice could be heard: "Get ready! Take your

places!" The scent of rose bushes, glistening with dew, floated through the windows. The western horizon was shrouded in purple smoke.

The guns boomed ceaselessly and the air trembled and shook the windowpanes. In the sky wave after wave, squadron after squadron of Soviet bombers and stormoviks flew past, westwards, with fighters wheeling round them, free as birds.

The women dressed hurriedly and walked to the edge of the village, where the other doctors, nurses and stretcher-bearers had already assembled.

Here under the lime trees Tanya saw two carts and a carriage. The horses, unharnessed and hobbled, were grazing on the young grass. Near the carts was a picturesque encampment. Shawls and blankets were spread on the ground but no one was sleeping. People with shreds of their national colours on their chests stood looking at the western horizon, exchanging remarks and gasping joyfully with surprise:

"O-la-la!..."

"O-oh!..."

The children were especially pleased. There were four of them here, three girls and a boy. In battered shoes, their eyes round with delight, they dashed about among the grownups, chattering something in their own language.

Representatives from nearly all the countries of Western Europe seemed to be gathered here. This roaring cannonade was clearing their way home.

The first thing Glasha did was to run and get some sweets for the children. Tanya looked with surprise at the carriage, which bore a strange resemblance to Chokhov's, the one in which she had met Lubentsov. But there had been many carriages on the German estates, of course, and quite possibly the heraldic deer was no rarity either.

Beside the carriage stood a beautiful, fair-haired girl. Her blue eyes wide open, she was gazing intently towards the west. At length the girl gave a loud sigh, turned round and encountered Tanya's keen glance. Then it was her turn to look Tanya over attentively and critically, as only women can look each other over—summing her up, noticing faults rather impudently and not without satisfaction.

Apparently she found no fault with Tanya and smiled in acknowledgment of the other woman's beauty. Tanya smiled back at her. A mutual liking sprang up between them, and the girl, pointing her finger towards the west, said slowly and with admiration:

"O-oh!..."

Tanya nodded in agreement and asked:

"Where are you from?"

"Where from?" Evidently the words were familiar to the girl.

"Nederlanden," she answered.

"Soon," said Tanya and waved her hand towards the west.

The girl began to nod happily and repeated:

"Soo, soo!..."

Meanwhile Glasha returned with sweets and sugar and began to distribute them to the children. The Dutch girl looked at Glasha, blushed, and approaching her started to say something in her own language. Glasha listened attentively, then spread out her arms helplessly and said:

"Well, what's the matter? Can't you speak plainly.... What do you want, dear?"

"Captain Vásil," said the Dutch girl breathlessly.

But this big, kind Russian woman did not understand her questions. Margarete could not be mistaken: this was the very woman she had seen once in the courtyard of the Borkau estate among Captain Vásil's soldiers.

Margarete decided not to leave Glasha on any account. Once this woman is here, then the Captain cannot be far away, she thought. To part with Glasha meant losing track of the Captain for ever. What a pity Marek, the Czech, had left yesterday with a group of fellow countrymen for his home in the south—he would have explained to this woman what the matter was!

Looking into the girl's face Glasha stroked her abundant soft hair and repeated sympathetically:

"What's the matter, dear?"

A stretcher-bearer ran up and passed on Rutkovsky's order to get ready to leave. Tanya threw a last look at the carriage, gave the glamorous Dutch girl a friendly nod and went back to the village. Glasha handed out the sweets to the children and hurried in pursuit of Tanya. Margarete followed her for a few paces, then stopped, sighed and shook her head. She watched the Russian women until they were out of sight.

How lucky they were, these Russian women! Wearing beautiful uniforms, with pistols, real people, not like her and her friends—helpless and pitiful refugees. She looked at the fine figure of the lovely Russian girl with some envy. Then she consoled herself by thinking that a Russian uniform would have suited her wonderfully, too.

Meanwhile the cannonade had ceased. The guns fired only occasionally and squadron after squadron of red-starred aircraft flew westwards almost unceasingly.

The foreigners began breaking camp, to follow slowly in the wake of the Russian army. But it was not so easy for Margarete to leave, she was still hoping the Captain was somewhere nearby.

The liberated foreigners had left the Borkau estate two weeks after the departure of Chokhov's company. One morning some Belgians had arrived from the next estate. They recommended going south, since fierce battles were taking place in the north and there was a

rumour about a break-through by German troops. Of course, that rumour was not to be believed. So many Russian soldiers, so many Russian tanks and guns had gone north! However, prudent people decided to move on a little further. Besides, the manor house had caught fire one night. Who had set fire to it, no one knew: some Croats, perhaps, who had passed by the other evening from the liberated villages near Stargard. Italians and Slovaks who arrived immediately after the fire also advised going south, although there was no thought of a successful German offensive.

When the labourers, with horses and carts taken from the stables of the baroness (she herself had disappeared no one knew where), took to the road, they were soon overtaken by Russian units moving down from the north after the victory over the Germans on the lower reaches of the Oder. Margarete would not sleep for nights on end, standing on the road and searching among the thousands of people for Captain Vasil. Sometimes Margot Mélier, who used to chaff Margarete a little about her passion, would take her place.

Among the Russians there were quite a few like the captain, young men with a determined look in their eyes, sitting just as straight and confidently in the saddle. But *her* captain was nowhere to be found.

When they arrived in this village Margarete and her companions had intended to push on southwards. But now the Russian offensive had begun, and after talking it over they decided to follow in the wake of the Russian front, to the west.

And suddenly Margarete, who had already lost all hope of tracing the Captain, had met Glasha.

Somewhat discouraged by the fact that Glasha had not understood her, Margarete nevertheless decided to go to the village and look among the Russian troops stationed there. In the village she began peeping into all

the backyards and finally provoked a warning shout from a patrolling sentry. She smiled sweetly at him and pointed importantly to her breast decorated with the Dutch colours. His look softened but he politely ordered her to move on. She wandered past the lorries and reached the eastern outskirts, where she stood looking hard at every passing soldier. No, the Captain and his men were not here.

On the way back she gave the sentry a friendly wink and went on to join her own people.

"Found him?" asked Margot.

"No," Margarete shook her head sadly.

Margot said seriously:

"Just as well. He's got no time to bother with you. The war goes on, mademoiselle. . . . The Russians have many tasks to attend to in the world."

Margarete maintained a dismal silence. Tasks were tasks, but love was love.

"I shall never forget him!" she said passionately.

At that moment a column of lorries and buses drove out of the village. They were loaded to the top with tents and boxes. On one of the lorries sat the beautiful Russian and beside her was the other, the stout one, whom she had seen on the Borkau estate. Margarete waved her hand to them. They waved back to her kindly.

The lorries flashed by and vanished round a bend in the road.

XIII

It was wonderful spring weather and the birds were singing. The Medical Battalion's lorries rolled along the road overtaking the carts of the division's rear services. The women looked with pride and awe at what was happening before their eyes.

From the woods and forests tanks rumbled out on to the roads, impetuously discarding their camouflage. Grimy tankmen stood erect in their open turrets. The heavy artillery, taken from their emplacements and already attached to tractors, rolled out on to the smooth asphalt.

The whole gigantic war machine, which had been waiting, buried in the depths of the forest, burst into life with a roar. All this, like Birnam wood coming to Dunsinane castle, moved on to Berlin, resounding with the snorts of horses, the rumble of tank tracks, merry quips and amiable curses.

Only now that the forests were emptied was it possible to see how immense had been the concealed force concentrated on the Oder, ready to rush on in the wake of the victoriously advancing forward units.

"And how is my Ilyusha getting on there?" Glasha, who had been quiet till now, decided to share her fears. "I bet it's hot there on the front line!"

A huge number of lorries had collected at the crossing. Officers directing the traffic with red flags in their hands let through the tank units that were due to go into the breach and widen it. Everything else came to a standstill at the side of the road. At last the tanks went past and then the lorries moved on.

Soon the Medical Battalion also moved slowly over the planks of the bridge. People did not even suspect what crossing this was that they were now using. They looked indifferently at the bridge, at the wooden curbs along its edges, at the sappers on duty at the crossing. To them all it seemed nothing but a clumsy plank structure.

Towards evening the Medical Battalion stopped and encamped on the other side of the Oder, in a village, which only that morning had been in the German rear. Wounded men arrived immediately from the regiments' aid

stations, and the usual intensive work of giving first aid to wounded began—a task the same in Byelorussia as near Berlin.

Men who were operated on here were immediately sent to the evacuation hospitals. It is impossible for a Medical Battalion surgeon to follow the healing of damaged tissues. This limits his experience. Tanya dreamed of getting into a big surgical clinic after the war.

But just because patients did not stay for long, it was doubly pleasant to receive an unexpected letter from an already forgotten patient—you could not remember them all!—to say that he had recovered or was recovering and to thank that first hand which, as it seemed to him, or as perhaps really was the case, had saved him.

On the west bank of the Oder the day after the Berlin operation had begun, Tanya received a letter from the "coachman."

Kallistrat Evgrafovich wrote:

"Dear Tatyana Vladimirovna,

"You are probably moving further on west, but I, in the hospital train, am moving on to the east. The people in the train are good and the service isn't bad. And now we are in Voronezh station and I have decided to write you this letter. At first it was very hard to leave the front just when the final battles were being fought, but now we have had a look at our home towns where the German has been and we have realized that there is a front here too. There's a lot of work to be done in the Motherland, there'll even be work for people with one hand. One of the nurses told me that they have a one-armed blacksmith in their village and he is highly skilled. True, he lost his left hand and I my right. And perhaps the nurse just tells me this, so that I shan't worry. But maybe she is telling the truth, because pounding with a hammer is an easy job, not like carpentry. You need both your hands

and your head as well for that. It's not blacksmith's work of course. But I think I shall be useful with my left hand. Everything here is smashed and destroyed. And the people are still living partly in dugouts like badgers, and baking bread in stoves out in the open. Though, of course, they are handy folks and a lot of cottages have been put up. You just want to get hold of an axe and knock together a cottage yourself. And all of us wounded curse the fascists for their treacherous attack that has brought so much grief to us Russians and so much trouble to our Soviet government. The local doctors say that you did my operation very well, it will be something like having two fingers. Thanks for that. Excuse this letter, perhaps you aren't at all interested in getting a letter from me. It is not me personally writing but my comrade. He's also a sapper, Alyoshin, a sergeant. He sends his best regards. It is difficult for me to write with my left hand. I remembered our cheerful carriage and then your care and friendship in the Medical Battalion, where you, like a real Soviet person, cared for the wounded soldiers of our Red Army and Navy. Be quick and take Berlin and come back. People are needed here; not all the fields have been sown yet and the children look weak, so doctors are needed too. By the way, please give my regards to Guards Major Lubentsov and I wish you happiness.

"Respectfully yours, Junior Sergeant

"Kallistrat Rukavishnikov."

Tanya was moved, but the last lines of the letter with the greetings to Lubentsov caused her sharp pain. She could not forget the scout. The manner, the words, the gestures, the smile of the man whom she thought dead, had become for her the embodiment of all that is most beautiful, brave and pure in Soviet people.

XIV

After inspecting the divisions before the attack the member of the Military Council returned to his quarters: at five-thirty he was to have a talk with a group of officers.

He returned to Headquarters at three o'clock. As he looked over the papers which had come in during the day General Sizokrylov glanced for a second at his big burnished-steel watch lying beside his inkstand. At last the little hand drew nearer to five and the big hand approached twelve.

Sizokrylov rose and walked about the room. At that moment out there on the front, on the bridgehead, the artillery attack had begun.

Here at Headquarters, far away from the front, it was quiet. Somewhere typewriters were rattling. Telephone conversations and voices floated up from the open windows of the lower floor.

The guard marched past smartly along the pavement.

Stopping near the sentry box the corporal of the guard gave the order to relieve the sentry. The new sentry took his stand beside the old one, turned about and stood at attention with a rifle in his hand. The old one shouldered arms and, marching with long strides away from his post, fell in behind the other sentries. The guard marched on to the next post. The tramp of iron-tipped soldiers' boots soon died away in the distance.

Five o'clock in the morning. The sky was clear, not yet blue but grey, and a mist was hugging the ground.

Sizokrylov stood at the window listening. It seemed to him that he could hear a distant noise like the far-off beat of surf. But perhaps it was the wind.

The officers summoned by the member of the Military Council were waiting in the anteroom, dozing in the big,

soft armchairs. Then someone said that it had "started," and they jumped up and went to the wide-open windows. Only a misty dawn outside. The guard was marching down the street.

The officers sat down again but no longer dozed; they began talking quietly but excitedly among themselves. These men had been specially recalled a week ago from fighting units and made to stay at H. Q. all that time, filling in various questionnaires.

A colonel, Sizokrylov's adjutant, opened the door and said:

"Please come in!"

The General turned round at the sound of footsteps, nodded to the officers and invited everybody to sit down.

A conversation began, and the further it continued the more it surprised the officers.

The questions put by the member of the Military Council were rather unusual. He was interested in the education and the Party experience of each of them, and asked various questions concerning the history of Germany as if he were conducting some kind of examination. He asked one lieutenant-colonel about Bismarck and about the problem of the unification of Germany, to which the colonel answered with some embarrassment that he disapproved of Bismarck as the representative of the powerful Junkers, but as for the unification, it was, in his opinion, a progressive cause.

The General listened attentively to the officers, keenly studying their faces. The officers were shy, although they were important commanders and political workers; one of them was even a general. In spite of their respect for the member of the Military Council they were asking themselves indignantly why they had at this historical moment been recalled from their units and formations. What could be more important now than fighting?

At six o'clock the adjutant came in and reported to the General:

"The interpreters have arrived."

The General ordered them to be brought into his study also.

About twenty junior lieutenants came into the room dressed in brand-new uniforms and peacetime infantry caps with purple bands. There were girls among them too.

They had only just finished studying and had been flown here straight from Moscow. At the sight of the General and his officers they came to attention. The girls' fair locks falling out from under their berets fluttered merrily in the fresh breeze blowing in from the wide-open windows. The arrival of the young people brightened up the severe room of the member of the Military Council.

"Comrades," he said, "the people I have chosen—the list will be announced later—are appointed commandants and assistant commandants of various German towns and regions. The establishments for the commandants' offices have already been approved, you will receive them. The interpreters whom you see here will be distributed among the commandants' offices. The personnel department is selecting office staff for you. Ahead of you lie new tasks, differing from your former wartime tasks. It is your business to establish order and peace everywhere. To organize the delivery and supply of food for the German workers. Along with the exposure and arrest of active fascists, encourage in every way the initiative of the German population, assist the work of the democratic parties and facilitate the restoration of the trade unions. In accordance with our Soviet traditions pay first attention to the feeding of the children. You are already half peacetime officers. The war will be finished by others. You are to begin building the peace."

He asked if there were any questions. A middle-aged Major asked to be released from his new duties and sent back to his unit.

"Reason?" asked the General.

The Major's forehead broke out in tiny beads of perspiration.

"I'm afraid I have not matured enough to be able to be humane towards the Germans." He stopped, waiting to see what the member of the Military Council would say in reply, but Sizokrylov was silent and the Major had to go on with his explanations: "The Germans killed my son. . . ." The member of the Military Council still did not speak. "My only son. I'm from Leningrad. I went through everything there. . . . The blockade. . . . Corpses on the Nevsky Prospect. . . ."

The Major stopped. It was so quiet that one of the girls could be heard to sigh.

The member of the Military Council said thickly:

"Narrow-minded talk!"

It became even quieter than before because, to tell the truth, none of those present had expected such an answer and were not at all inclined to criticize the Major like that for his refusal.

"We cannot and we shall not permit anyone," went on the member of the Military Council, "to forget the crimes of fascism. We do not absolve the German people of responsibility either. But we cannot identify the German people with fascism. You know that from the speeches of Stalin and it is intolerable that you, as a member of the Party, should not consider binding the directives of the Party, and as a soldier, the orders of the Supreme Commander-in-Chief. Think this question over well and report your final decision to me tomorrow through my adjutant."

The telephone rang. The General picked up the receiver, listened for a minute, his face brightened and

he even gave a short laugh, revealing, as he did so, a kindness hitherto deeply concealed in the lines of his determined mouth.

"The first line of the German defence has been broken," he said putting down the receiver, and dismissed the officers.

Left alone, the General looked absent-mindedly at the edge of the table, where an envelope he had not noticed before, was lying. The adjutant must have put it there quietly when he came in.

Other people, who had been summoned by the member of the Military Council or who had come to him for reasons of their own, were already waiting in the ante-room. Here there were personnel officers, supply officers and political workers. The General received them one by one. From time to time he would ring up the Front Commander who was at his observation post. The commander informed him that the offensive was developing successfully but the Germans were putting up a desperate resistance. They had concentrated a large quantity of artillery and quite a number of tanks. The enemy's air force was continuously in action against our battle formations and units not far in the rear.

Every now and then during the conversation the General's glance lighted on the envelope lying on the edge of the table, and then the General would find himself thinking: "I wish that letter were not here...."

But the letter was there and it was making a strong demand for attention and a reply.

The General steeled himself and opened the envelope. His wife wrote:

"My dear. During the past few weeks I have been terribly worried about Andryusha. He did not write regularly before but now there is not a word from him. You are silent too, and do not call me up on the telephone. I know you will be angry with me that I am always complaining—

forgive me. And of course I know you are advancing and have no leisure now for writing letters. But I have been so worried, especially in the last few days. Yesterday I rang up the Defence Commissariat and saw Alexander Semyonovich—he kindly sent a car for me. Of course it is foolish nervousness, but I felt he was talking rather strangely to me. He did not look at me at all and his answers to my questions, if not irrelevant, were not very much to the point. I asked his permission to ring you on the telephone from his office but he answered that you were on the move and so there was no telephone connection with you now. Then he called in some people—at least ten generals among them—and it seemed to me, don't be angry at my old woman's anxiousness, that he did so on purpose, so that he should not have to talk to me. And all your friends who, one must do them justice, often visited me and telephoned hardly ever appear lately.

"I implore you to write how Andryusha is. I am quite worn out with worry.

"Anya."

He had to write some kind of answer. But not a single thought came into his head. And, once more, Sizokrylov said to himself: No, this needs thinking out properly, you can't just write anything and be done with it....

He reached for the file containing recommendations for awards. Looking through them absently, he read of the feats of infantrymen, tankmen, artillerymen and airmen. In the sparing and often inexpressive phrases of the award lists the General caught the ceaseless pulsation of the fighting life. The first names and surnames gave him a vague idea of unfamiliar people he had seen sometime, of different faces glimpsed on the front-line roads, in dark dugouts and leafy shelters.

Occasionally familiar names turned up.

Krasikov. Recommended for the Order of Kutuzov, second class, for the Altdamm operation: "Led a battalion in attack. . . ." An unsuitable occupation for a prominent staff officer. No use giving a commander's Order for that. The medal "For Valour" would have been enough, but then only if he were a company or battalion commander. Besides, it had all happened on the 20th of March when the operation was largely over and the Germans had left only a covering force in Altdamm.

Sizokrylov put the sheet aside without signing it.

The General could not tolerate that worthless and obsolete habit of some of the senior commanders, who, instead of directing the whole operation deliberately and calmly, would run off to the front line unnecessarily. In its way it was a kind of self-indulgence concealed by an exhibition of personal bravery. The source of it was not at all a fighting spirit but an inability to lead, in certain cases even evasion of the most difficult and responsible duties.

Sizokrylov was generally displeased with Krasikov's conduct lately. He had a vague feeling of disquiet, based primarily on a series of unconnected impressions. The more information he obtained, the more certain he became that Krasikov had begun to treat his work off-handedly and was occupied with other affairs—of a strictly personal nature, no doubt.

Accustomed to making considered decisions, Sizokrylov was not taking any measures for the time being but just keeping his eyes open. There was an old Party rule that the accused must have his case heard, and at present the member of the Military Council could not take up this affair. Moreover, he did not want to concern himself with trifling matters at the moment of triumph, on the very eve of victory.

We'll postpone that question for a short while, decided the General. Till the war's over.

It was very quiet and it seemed to the General that the whole world was holding its breath to listen to the thunder of the battle out there, beyond the Oder.

He remembered the soldiers and officers whom he had seen and with whom he had talked only yesterday. Now those men were storming the German defences. With triumphant shouts: "For Motherland! For Stalin!"—those Party organizers and tens of thousands of other soldiers were advancing on Berlin. Stalin had done everything for them to take the enemy capital with the fewest possible casualties. He had especially ordered the commanders to spare not their ammunition but their men, to crush the German fire power with all the strength of the mighty armament which he, the Supreme Commander-in-Chief, had assigned to the armies taking Berlin.

Like hundreds of thousands of people on all fronts General Sizokrylov thought now of Stalin. At this moment one of the greatest achievements in the great life of the teacher and leader of the people was being accomplished.

General Sizokrylov knew Stalin's plan of the Berlin operation well. He had been told with what supreme clarity and fulness Stalin had expounded that plan at a meeting of the commanders in the Kremlin. To execute that plan powerful troop formations had been transferred under cover of night, artillery had been brought up, aircraft regiments had been flown across to new bases. New tanks and self-propelled guns had crawled rumbling out of blacked-out workshops; new lorries had rolled off assembly lines on to waiting trucks in spacious factory yards. Women in textile factories had been sewing the grey cloth for soldiers' greatcoats. Reinforcements had been trained in the rear for the divisions engaged in the advance on Berlin.

Hundreds of thousands of people without suspecting it, worked for the realization of Stalin's plan of the last

battle of the war (for the direct purpose of their labour was concealed by two strict words: "military secret").

And Stalin's calm and vigilant glance penetrated everywhere, into all the innumerable details of those preparations, into the gigantic labour of millions. The design of a high-speed fighter, the calibre of a new gun, the tactics of a rifle company and the military art of the front commanders, the political situation on a world scale and the supplying of the soldiers with bread and tobacco—everything was the concern of the Supreme Commander-in-Chief.

Whenever Sizokrylov chanced to see Stalin he always experienced a feeling of love, gratitude and involuntary surprise. How could one not be surprised at the versatility, the crystal clarity of judgment, the boldness of decision of the great teacher! Stalin possessed the great ability of finding in every new problem that confronted him fresh aspects unsuspected by others; and in the final account it was these aspects that would turn out to be the most important and decisive. And when he subjected a question to his merciless analysis, everything would suddenly become clear and understandable, and the most confused matter would seem as if illuminated by a bright and steady beam of light.

To be like Stalin was impossible, but to learn from him, to envisage every action of one's own in the light of Stalin's teaching and his method of leadership—that is what Sizokrylov and others, big and small workers in the Party, strove to do.

Late in the evening Sizokrylov drove out to the observation post, to the Front Commander. He spent several days there. During that time events unfolded at unbelievable speed.

The German 9th Army, commanded by Infantry General Busse, was making a fighting retreat before the Soviet divisions advancing on Berlin. It consisted of the 5th SS Highland Rifle Corps under the command of SS Obergruppenführer Kleinhörsterkamp, the 11th SS Tank Corps under the command of SS Obergruppenführer Jöckeln, the 56th Tank Corps and the 101st Corps. Altogether in the first line there were sixteen divisions and countless supplementary, security, police, workers', sappers' and Volkssturm battalions. In support of the divisions of the first echelon, suffering heavy losses and retreating under the pressure of Soviet troops, the German Command afterwards threw into the battle one after another the 23rd SS Motorized Division, the 11th SS Motorized Division, the Tank Division "Müncheberg," the Motorized Division "Kurmarn," the 156th Infantry, the 18th and 25th Motorized Divisions and the Anti-Tank Brigade "Hitlerjugend." General of the Air Force Wimmer's first air training division was turned into infantry and thrown into battle. In all, the German troops covering Berlin numbered up to half a million men.

Soviet divisions stormed the enemy's fortified positions unceasingly.

There were so many of these positions! There was no end to them! The Germans had dug up the whole region, sowed it with mine fields and covered it with barbed wire. Barricades of flowering apple trees blocked the roads.

After breaking through the three strong positions of the first defence strip our units reached the second, which stretched from the town of Wriezen to the south and southeast through Kunersdorf to the Seelow heights. This strip, exceeding the Oder area in strength and fire power, was based on the river Friedlander-Strom, the Quappendorf Canal and finally on the strongly fortified Seelow heights.

Here our advance slowed down and this was reported to the High Command.

Then the Supreme Commander-in-Chief put into the operation the second part of his plan. He ordered the First Ukrainian Front, advancing on the south, to make a leap with a part of its forces to the southern gates of the German capital. Simultaneously Stalin ordered into action the Second Byelorussian Front. After forcing the Oder this front routed the third German army and began to develop its advance, covering the First Byelorussian Front on the north.

The gigantic, rapid, flexible operation of three fronts thought out by the great strategist unfolded on a wider and wider scale, covering the territory of three German provinces: Mecklenburg, Brandenburg and Saxony, over which foamed and roared and tore the stormy flood of Soviet troops.

XV

On the third day of the offensive General Sereda's Division reached the town of Wriezen, which the enemy had turned into a fortress. The fortress of Wriezen was the keystone of the second German defence line on this sector.

After forcing the small river Woltzin under German fire, the soldiers came under heavy fire from the west bank of the Neuer Canal and flanking fire from the railway embankment on the left. Here the General threw into the battle his Third Regiment, which after a short artillery barrage forced the Neuer Canal, taking about two hundred prisoners and three dozen guns. But then the advance came to a standstill. Artillery and machine guns were firing madly from the west bank of the Alter Canal and from a strongly fortified point at Bliesdorf.

From the southern outskirts of Wriezen, visible not far away, guns hidden in houses opened fire on the soldiers with canister shells.

The General swore over the telephone at the Regimental Commander for the delay and went himself to the regiment with Lubentsov. After crossing the Neuer Canal on a raft they stepped on to the bank. The whole bank was riddled with shell holes. German machine guns were firing for all they were worth.

"Down," said the Divisional Commander.

For the second time since he had been serving with the Divisional Commander, Lubentsov saw him lie down under fire. After a minute the General turned his head to Lubentsov and said:

"I got excited for nothing. The fire is really...." He paused. "But perhaps it's just that one's afraid to die at the very gates of Berlin...."

With these words he forced himself to rise and they made their way to the Regimental Commander's observation post. Here the General ordered Lubentsov and the artillery observers to spot accurately the Germans' fire points and artillery positions. When the scouts had collected the necessary information, the General contacted his own O. P. by radio, and, giving the squares, called up aircraft.

Stormoviks appeared and attacked Bliesdorf from the air. After the raid the Germans were silent for a while, but when our soldiers began to move forward the enemy machine guns, though fewer in number than before, again opened fire. Apparently the Germans were well dug in.

The General decided to wait for darkness in order to organize a night attack. And at that moment the enemy suddenly ceased fire.

Taras Petrovich was puzzled and looked through his binoculars: Soviet infantry were pouring into Bliesdorf

from the south. The neighbouring division had broken through ahead.

"Well, thanks for that!" muttered the Divisional Commander, wiping the sweat from his damp forehead.

The soldiers advanced, crossed the Alter Canal without stopping and went into action on the southern outskirts of Wriezen.

The approaches to the town were strongly fortified and densely mined.

Guns were dragged up and began to hammer methodically at the German fortifications.

Lubentsov and his scouts were in the trenches among the infantry. In the evening they brought him a deserter, who had only just made his appearance in one of the regiment's sectors. How he had found his way through the mine fields was beyond comprehension; anyhow, he had suddenly appeared in front of our breastworks with raised hands and said in broken Russian:

"I surrender."

He was an oldish, grim-faced German with the rank of unter-offizier. Calmly and even with a note of triumph in his voice, he explained that he, Willi Klaus, had directed the mining of the southern edge of the town.

He thought a moment, then added that he had deserted to the Russians in order to lead them through by a safe route.

"Enough bloodshed!" he said.

Lubentsov studied keenly this grim, determined face. He asked the German what he had been before mobilization and to what party he had belonged before Hitler's coming to power. It turned out that Klaus was a worker, a turner; he had been born and had lived all his life in Berlin. He had belonged to no party but sympathized with the Communists. Lubentsov called in Oganesyán who talked to the German for a long time.

"It's hard to say, of course, but he seems to be an honest man," Oganessian reported finally to the Major of the Guards.

Leaving Klaus in the care of Oganessian and the scouts, Lubentsov went to see the Divisional Commander, and told him and Plotnikov in detail about his conversation with the German. Klaus gave the impression of being an honest man and his desire to avoid pointless bloodshed was a natural human desire in the circumstances.

"But perhaps it's not worth risking?" said the General thoughtfully.

Plotnikov laughed:

"Got hold of a German Susanin,* you think?"

"Johann Susanin," laughed Lubentsov. "No, this seems to be something quite different. Let me try it, Comrade General."

The General said:

"All right, try. The scouts and one rifle company will go with you. Take along two or three sappers. Arrange with Sizykh about artillery support. But be on the lookout, watch that Johann of yours...."

After making detailed arrangements with the artillerymen and collecting two sappers, Lubentsov returned to the forward area. Here it was quiet and dark. Only from the dugout which the soldiers had already made beside the trench, came a faint glimmer of yellow light. In this dugout were Klaus, Oganessian, the scouts and the Regimental Commander, who was there to satisfy his curiosity.

Lubentsov gave him the Divisional Commander's orders to detail a rifle company for this job.

* Ivan Susanin—Russian peasant and patriot who was forced to act as guide for a detachment of Polish invaders advancing on Moscow. He led them into an impenetrable forest and was killed by the Poles (in 1613) who met their death there, too.

"And include a machine gun, if you can spare it," added Lubentsov.

Greatly impressed by the scout's scheme, the Regimental Commander said that he would assign the best company. After he left, the Battalion Commander sent by him appeared. It was the broad-shouldered giant with two Orders of the Red Banner on his mighty chest.

"The Germans are beginning to see the light," he said, nodding towards Klaus. He told the Major that he had alerted the company detailed for the night affair and that it would soon be here.

"I would have gone with you myself," said the Battalion Commander, "but the Regimental Commander won't allow it."

With the artillerymen, who soon arrived, Lubentsov agreed on a signal for opening fire: one red and one green rocket.

By two in the morning everything was ready.

"Klaus," said Lubentsov, getting up, "you know what to expect if you are deceiving us?"

Klaus stood up, listened to Oganesyán, who translated the Guards Major's question word for word, and said:

"Jawohl."

He was tense but calm.

Lubentsov pushed two grenades under his camouflage cape, pulled his pistol out of its holster and they left the dugout.

The sky was full of stars. The scouts and the soldiers of the rifle company were sitting on their haunches in the trench.

The Company Commander, a senior lieutenant, reported to Lubentsov that the company was ready.

"Leave your packs, messkins and everything else here," ordered Lubentsov. "You are scouts not infantrymen now."

The soldiers obediently dropped their belongings in the bottom of the trench.

Lubentsov explained to them the order of movement. The German would go in front—all eyes turned on the German; next, Lubentsov, and following him in single file, the scouts, and then the rifle company. Sergeant-Major Voronin, Lubentsov's deputy, would bring up the rear. His orders were to be obeyed like those of the Major. As soon as a rocket flare went up they would all lie down and keep lying still, until they received further orders.

Klaus looked questioningly at Lubentsov. The Major nodded.

They set off. At first they followed the road, then turned left into the bushes.

"Don't lag behind!" said Lubentsov to Mitrokhin who was behind him. Mitrokhin passed the word along:

"Don't lag behind!"

The wheels of the machine gun squeaked quietly.

Klaus turned round to Lubentsov and pointed to the ground. Lubentsov understood: all around were scarcely visible black patches—mines.

Klaus slowed down. Then he stood still for a moment and began to walk resolutely forward, towards a factory chimney clearly outlined against the sky. Machine guns rattled and flashes of tracer bullets cut through the air.

Klaus turned sharply right, and said:

"Leisel!"

"Quiet!" said Lubentsov to Mitrokhin, who passed it on:

"Quiet!"

They crossed a potato field. Klaus stopped occasionally, bent down, and to see better, looked from ground level at the outlines of the houses in the Frankfort suburb. Then rockets soared into the sky and the men all lay down. Lubentsov raised his head and looked at the prostrate men. A greenish light shone down on them.

They were like lumps of grey earth. Nevertheless Lubentsov was surprised that the Germans did not notice anything. But the enemy, apparently, was too sure of the impregnability of his mine fields, too sure that should someone venture there at night, the explosions of the mines would at once give the intruder away.

When the flare went out they moved on. Then Klaus stopped, sank on to his haunches and began to search for something on the ground.

"Down!" whispered Lubentsov.

"Down!" whispered Mitrokhin.

The potato field came to an end, giving way to kitchen gardens overgrown with high soft grass. Klaus crawled along the edge of the field, searching for something. Lubentsov followed close behind him.

Klaus was searching for something and could not find it. He was feeling the grass very carefully. At last he said quietly:

"Hier!"

He was touching a narrow path almost completely covered with grass.

Lubentsov said:

"Come on."

Mitrokhin passed it back:

"Come on."

"Crawl," said Lubentsov.

Mitrokhin passed it back:

"Crawl."

Again rockets soared into the sky. This time, apparently, the Germans noticed something. A machine gun opened up. Yet another rocket burst. Something exploded. There was a groan. Lubentsov pulled the rocket pistol out of his tunic and fired into the air. The red rocket wheeled high above them. He fired the second, the green one. Almost simultaneously our artillery opened fire and Lubentsov shouted loudly:

“Forward!”

His voice sounded hoarse. He shouted the same word again and started to run forward along the path, dragging Klaus with him. Before them shells were bursting with fiery flashes. One house broke into flames, then another. The soldiers were breathing heavily behind. Voronin's voice could be heard repeating quietly:

“Forward, lads, forward!”

Accustomed to night actions, the scouts, unlike the riflemen, were comparatively calm. The riflemen were already jumpy and encouraging themselves with shouts.

By the light of the rockets they passed the kitchen gardens, and here Klaus said loudly in relief:

“Ende!”

The mine fields ended. The company spread out in a line and advanced, firing raggedly on the move from sub-machine guns and rifles.

They broke into the first houses. It was light, this time not from German rockets—the rocket-firers had apparently been killed or had run away—but from the glow of fires started by our artillery. The scouts and Klaus, who was no longer under guard—he seemed to have become one of them—dashed back.

Company after company doubled across the mine field, along the path Klaus had pointed out.

At dawn the general attack began. The neighbouring division entered the town from the north. Here and there, brief struggles began with German soldiers concealed in houses. Lubentsov and the scouts were breaking through kitchen gardens and orchards further and further to the north. The noise of the battle gradually became more distant, then it grew quiet. From somewhere came the sound of lorry horns and hoarse human voices.

The scouts climbed over a fence and landed in a small garden full of blossoming fruit trees. They sat down to rest in a little summer-house, and at that moment

Lubentsov noticed a mound of earth, similar to an *omshantnik* in the villages of his Amur homeland. Something stirred in the mound and a little wooden door opened. The scouts snatched out grenades and prepared to throw them. A tousled head came into view, then a freckled lad with a cat in his arms climbed out into the garden. He looked all round, seeming even to sniff the air with his snub nose to discover if the firing was really over, then shouted piercingly:

"Alles ruhig!..."*

The boy was so much like a Russian kid climbing out of an *omshantnik*! He did not notice the scouts. An old man and a young woman followed him out of the shelter. They walked towards the house and then, noticing the Russians, started back in fear.

"Alles ruhig," repeated Lubentsov.

Yes, it had grown quiet everywhere. The Germans had stopped resisting.

Townspeople peeped timidly out of the windows; at last they began to trickle out on to the street. They cast timid glances round them. Slowly they approached the Soviet leaflets which the political workers had plastered on the walls of the houses.

These leaflets quoted Stalin's words: "Hitlers come and go, but the German people and the German state live on."

Even now, after such upheavals, the Germans repeated the first half of this phrase in a whisper, looking round fearfully in case a blockleiter should be standing nearby:

"Die Hitler kommen und gehen...."

Russian field kitchens were smoking on the streets. Cooks bathed in steam dealt out big buckets of porridge. The children, grasping the new situation quicker than the adults, were the first to approach these kitchens,

* All quiet!

and the cooks dealt out their rich porridge to them as well. Very soon, queues of children with plates and saucepans had formed up at the kitchens.

Looking round nervously, a pastor walked past; three days ago he had read a sermon in church on the text: "... So David prevailed over the Philistine with a sling and with a stone, and smote the Philistine, and slew him." By the sling and stone the pastor had meant the new secret weapon which fascist propaganda had been plugging with special enthusiasm in the past few days.

Now the pastor had visited the Soviet commandant's office and received permission to hold a Sunday service. When he went to the commandant, his wife had sent him off with wails and lamentations. He himself had felt like a martyr going to his death for the sake of the Christian idea. However, it had not fallen to his lot to wear a martyr's wreath. The commandant, an extremely polite Russian officer, had offered him tea.

Yes, he must find a different text, quite a different text for the Sunday sermon. Perhaps best of all: "... my people have strayed like lost sheep. Their shepherds have deceived them and led them into the mountains."

But after resting, the Russian soldiers moved on again to the west. When they came out on the highway they saw an unusual sight. Among a group of German prisoners stood the division's reconnaissance officer, Major Lubentsov. He was firmly grasping the hand of one of the Germans, a man in a ragged green uniform, as dirty and unshaven as all the rest. To their surprise a car drove up and the Chief of the Political Department jumped out, went up to the same German and also gave him a firm and friendly handshake. And the German said something quietly, smiled with emotion and was quite like a decent man, were it not, of course, for his hateful green uniform.

As soon as troops break through strongly fortified areas and come out into a locality less prepared for defence the whole tenor of their life is transformed in the twinkling of an eye. The continual tense strain, when nerves are stretched to the very limit, when death hides in every miserable stream and shady coppice, is replaced by the fighting joy of pursuing the already broken or isolated enemy units.

Steinbecker Heide, a large mixed forest, was the last fortified area in this sector where the Germans put up organized resistance. Here, Captain Chokhov's company captured prisoners who turned out to be policemen of the Berlin police force. It cannot be said that the policemen resisted very stubbornly. Apparently they were more used to dealing with unarmed opponents. When the self-propelled artillery regiment broke through their battle formations they began to surrender in large groups.

Towns and villages became still more numerous and at last they turned into one large populated area, which bore, however, various names. While Headquarters were reporting the capture of Bernau, Buch, Zöpernick, Lindenberg, Blankenburg, the soldiers were taking these areas as one large inhabited centre and thought that this was already Berlin.

The proximity of the large city was becoming more and more noticeable. Lines of high voltage electric pylons stretched everywhere. Viaducts and bridges, the platforms of suburban stations, huge storeyards, water towers, "Berlin" pubs, the advertisements of metropolitan firms and newspapers—everything marked the approach of the giant city. And everywhere—on houses, on roadside hoardings, on the fences round storage-dumps and warehouses, on bridges and railway cars and even simply on the asphalt of the road—glistened fresh inscriptions:

three words, large and small, black and white, green and red, painted in Gothic and Latin script:

"Berlin bleibt deutsch!"*

These words, meaning that the Russians would not enter Berlin, sounded like an incantation. They rang with fear and helpless anger. Here there was something to laugh at, had the soldiers had time to pay attention to the inscriptions.

The Germans had barricaded the streets with trees, iron railings, overturned buses and anti-tank blocks. Mortars mounted in gardens and courtyards barked at the crossroads. Faustpatrone men lodged in cellars, potted at the tanks and self-propelled guns.

Mortars, anti-tank guns and three tanks were attached to Captain Chokhov's company. That a simple rifle company should have such supporting arms indicated the abundance of armament in those days of the final offensive.

"Just give us bombing aircraft," said Corporal Semiglav delightedly, "and you won't know us from a complete army!"

Chokhov had been slightly wounded in the arm by a grenade splinter, but he retained his unruffled appearance. A dirty bandage hung in folds on his arm. On his shoulder he was carrying a light machine gun, which he manned himself: the machine gunner had been killed, and Chokhov did not want to weaken the fire power of the company.

In the narrow bottleneck streets the tanks and self-propelled guns were suffering heavy losses from the faustpatrone men lodged in the cellars. After consulting with the tankmen Chokhov decided to adopt the following tactics: the tanks would fire upwards at the attics and upper floors where the enemy's machine gunners and

* Berlin stays German! (Hitler's last slogan.)

sub-machine gunners were stationed. The soldiers were made responsible for disarming the faustpatrone men—the German anti-tank soldiers—in the cellars and lower floors.

These tactics were successful.

Street after street passed into our hands. At the crossroads soldiers and sappers under cover of fire from tanks and artillery pulled apart the rubble and barricades; then the tanks, blasting the upper floors with a hurricane of fire, moved forward while the infantry, keeping close to the houses, threw grenades into the cellars and directed a murderous flanking fire at the crossroads.

No one slept now. Days and nights became part of each other. At night it was light from the burning houses and rocket flares. By day it was dark from the smoke.

When a powerful many-storied house put up strong resistance Chokhov would run to the artillery units coming up in the rear. Then the artillerymen would go on ahead and, under cover of fire from infantry and tanks, drag their huge guns up to the house, and the guns would fire slap into the walls like gigantic pistols pointing at the hearts of stone monsters.

Chokhov's soldiers got very friendly with the tank crews. In the short quiet spells they ate together, told each other about their lives and shared impressions of Germany. It should be said that this fighting comradeship in the battlefield played no small part in the success of the offensive.

Previously, tanks and self-propelled guns had been for the infantry just an important additional arm, mighty assistants in battle. But now that the soldiers knew the inmates of these steel machines their feelings for them were especially warm. As they dealt with the German faustpatrone men, Slivenko and his comrades knew that they, apart from anything else, were preserving the life

of, say, Dmitri Petrovich, or Mitya, the silent lad from Sverdlovsk, and his turret gunner, Pavlusha from Moscow, a jokster and a wit. It was a real combined operation!

In spite of the heat of battle Captain Chokhov kept turning the idea over in his mind. At last he decided to tell Slivenko about it. Managing to call the Senior Sergeant aside, Chokhov showed him the map of Berlin with the Reichstag and government buildings on the Wilhelmstrasse marked on it in red pencil.

"That's where we must make for," he said. "It would be good to capture Hitler himself.... Well, of course, I don't know about that.... But to be the first to break in there."

Slivenko smiled.

"It would be good all right," he said at last, "but who knows what road we will take. It's a big city...."

Chokhov agreed with him but began to argue that they seemed to be heading straight in that direction and that it would do no harm to have a red flag ready, a victory banner, to hoist over the Reichstag.

The events of the next few days proved that Slivenko was right. Having occupied a series of suburbs the regiment suddenly came out in a country district plentifully spotted with lakes. Berlin dropped behind somewhere and only the artillery—here, there and everywhere, in the hollows, along the roads, on the fringes of woods—seemed to be fighting with Berlin.

The guns were firing at those very objectives of which Chokhov was dreaming: at targets 105 and 153.

Target 105 was the German Reichstag, target 153—the Reichschancellery.

The artillerymen were in a state of feverish excitement and looked proudly at the passing infantry, whose arms were too short to reach what the artillery could reach.

A tall soldier, looking like a tiny tot beside his huge gun, operated numerous levers and shouted before each discharge:

"That's a slug in Goebbels' mug!"

Another, beardless, still quite a boy, amused himself by writing in chalk on the shells various fanciful inscriptions such as: "To Hitler in hell from his dear little Nell."

The words of the artillery commands now sounded especially triumphant:

"At the German Reichstag, battalion, six rounds, fire!"

"At the fascist den, azimuth forty-seven twenty, gun sight twenty-five, four rounds rapid, fire!"

Chokhov watched the artillerymen manning their guns, carrying up gleaming shells and ramming them into the breeches, and he almost envied these shells which in a few seconds would burst asunder some wall or other in the last stronghold of fascism.

Soon they no longer passed even artillery positions. The road kept strictly to the west, through the pleasure resorts adjoining Berlin. That was the order. Chokhov was puzzled.

Towards evening on the 22nd of April, after defeating a German covering detachment, the company came out at a river.

Veselchakov ordered them to prepare to cross. The soldiers took off their boots and tunics and tied them in bundles.

Some artillerymen came up to the river.

"Will you give us support?" asked Semiglav.

"We will, boys, don't be afraid," said one of the artillerymen.

"We aren't afraid," said Semiglav proudly, although he was a little afraid of this dark, cold river which they had to swim.

Chokhov was to swim across with his company, but remained dressed and booted as usual. His small calf-leather boots squeaked. He did not consider it possible for an officer to undress, he just took his Komsomol and identity cards out of his tunic and, taking off his cap, put them inside. Then he let down the strap of his cap and fastened it under his chin so that it should not fall off.

The soldiers sat down on the bank and dangled their legs into the water.

"Don't smoke!" warned the Sergeant-Major.

A group of people soon appeared on the bank. Recognizing the Divisional Commander among them, Chokhov stood up.

With the Divisional Commander were Lubentsov, Migayev and other officers. They looked for a time in silence at the opposite bank. It was dark and quiet over there, the Germans gave no sign of their presence.

Chokhov heard the Divisional Commander giving directions to the artillery about covering fire for the crossing. Then the General came up nearer to the infantry and peering through the darkness at the dim figures of the soldiers, he asked:

"Infantry ready?"

"Ready, Comrade General!" Chokhov snapped back.

Taking advantage of the right moment the Captain went up to Lubentsov.

"Where are we heading?" asked Chokhov in a whisper.

"We've practically left Berlin behind already."

The Guards Major smiled:

"Can't be helped."

After forcing the river Havel the division was to turn to the south and move through the western suburbs of Berlin to Potsdam.

The adjacent divisions had the similar task of blockading Berlin from the west.

Thus, to these formations had fallen the responsibility of carrying out the third part of Stalin's plan of the Berlin operation: to surround the capital of Germany while General Chuikov's Stalingrad Guards and Generals Kuznetsov's and Berzarin's troops took Berlin by frontal attack.

Chokhov could not help being surprised at the immensity of the operation for the encirclement and capture of the German capital. He had to admit the utter insignificance of his little, ambitious plans before the grandeur of the common task.

At twenty-three hours the guns opened fire and at this signal the soldiers slipped slowly into the water. The water was cold, dark and seemed to be thick, as if one could cut it into black strips with a knife.

The bottom fell away beneath their feet, and the men swam, holding on to boards, rafts, barrels and other handy objects with one hand while paddling the water with the other. Something flamed up on the west bank, momentarily lighting the floating heads.

As was to be expected, machine guns opened up from the German bank.

"Faster!" Slivenko hurried his men.

Bullets whined into the water, which hissed softly at their touch.

Nearby someone groaned. Slivenko grasped the man's arm and dragged him along, but the latter gulped, muttered something and grabbed at Slivenko's shoulder. Slivenko went under with him. As he did so he instinctively closed his eyes but under the water he opened them again. He noticed that on the surface of the river it had become quite light, perhaps from a fire.

Slivenko struggled forward, kicked out and again went under but his feet touched the bottom and at that moment he felt a strong hand grasp him.

"Alive?" he heard the Captain's voice above him, but he could not answer because he had opened his mouth wide to take in the reviving, sweet, night air.

A burst of machine-gun bullets tore along the water, ripping it like cloth. The soldiers ran.

Slivenko dragged the wounded man with him. The river became still shallower. The machine guns on our bank rattled still louder.

Wet sand. Grass. Slivenko fell down on the bank and shouted in a weak voice:

"Hurrah!"

At the same time he fired his sub-machine gun and other men beside him opened up too. Somewhere nearby the Captain was firing from the light machine gun. Two rockets shot into the air one after the other and it grew light, and Slivenko could have looked round now to see who was lying beside him wounded or perhaps even dead. But he did not dare to look round and kept on firing and firing, now and then shouting weakly the usual word "hurrah," scarcely knowing why he did so.

The men hurriedly put their boots on as they lay, and pulled their wet tunics over their wet bodies. Then the Captain gave the command "forward." In the general clatter Slivenko tried to catch the sound of the second light machine gun, from which Semiglav should have been firing, but he did not hear it.

Slivenko crawled further and further on, to where the enemy machine gun was firing. Then the machine gun stopped and from behind came the shouts of new sections which had just crossed. Gogoberidze crawled up to Slivenko. They lay silently side by side. Then the Sergeant-Major, unusually quiet, joined them. The three lay together and did not talk and did not look back at the bank, where Semiglav lay, cold and still.

XVII

After the forcing of the Havel, Lubentsov decided to move on with the scouts on horseback. Under these conditions such a form of reconnaissance was the most convenient: unlike cars, cavalry does not need roads, it moves with sufficient speed and, most important of all, it makes no noise.

In the morning Lubentsov ordered Kablukov to saddle up, and he rode out with Meshchersky at the head of his troop.

West of Berlin no one expected to see Russians.

The villages and suburbs lived quiet, if troubled, lives. The sun shone abundantly and brightly, shedding its rays on the houses and fences, and everywhere throwing its merciless beams on Hitler's last incantation: "Berlin bleibt deutsch!"

The scouts rode slowly, listening keenly to everything that was going on around them. From the east, that is from Berlin—yes, strangely enough, Berlin lay to the east—came the distant explosions of shells.

They went deep into a forest. The sound of the horses' hoofs could hardly be heard. Not far away they caught a glimpse of an old man with a bundle of firewood on his shoulders. He shot a glance at the riders but at once dropped his eyes, not recognizing them, evidently, as Russians.

Soon the trees began to grow thinner and Lubentsov saw a wide grassy field, on which black aircraft with white crosses were drawn up in a line. There were thirty-eight of them. They were all "J-87s"—dive-bombers well known to every Russian soldier. Men were swarming round the machines. They looked fairly calm. Apparently they considered that the Russians were a long way off and that the Havel was a trusty shield.

The scouts retired into the forest, and Lubentsov sent a soldier back to the division with a message about the presence of aircraft on Nieder-Neuendorf aerodrome. The Guards Major himself and the rest of the scouts rode west to the village of Schönwald, which the Divisional Commander had ordered them to reconnoitre. Near the village they dismounted, left the horses in the charge of Kablukov, and went further on foot.

Here, as everywhere west of Berlin, it was quiet and deserted. It seemed as if everything in the village had died. Only from time to time could one hear the bleat of sheep and the lazy bark of a dog. On the northern boundary, to the right of the road, stood a church surrounded by a garden. The scouts went into the garden and approached the fence that ran along the street. They lay down behind the brick foundation of the fence and began to watch through the iron railings.

Two children peeped out of the gate of the next house. They walked to the corner and stood there, seeming to listen to the artillery fire in Berlin. Then they went away.

There were no troops in the village.

The scouts returned the same way to their horses and rode on through the forest to the southwest. The sun-warmed resin smelt sweetly. The nearer they came to the highway the slower Lubentsov rode. At last he reined in his horse and listened. An uneven tramp of feet could be heard coming from the road. Lubentsov jumped off his horse and handed the bridle to one of his men. Without looking round—he knew that all the others would follow suit in the proper order, leaving someone to guard the horses—Lubentsov walked towards the road and lay down beside it in the bushes.

The road stretched before him—broad and empty. But then, round the bend rode three German soldiers on bicycles, armed with sub-machine guns. Then a large group of men appeared wearing a queer kind of garb striped

like mattress covers. This disorderly crowd was being escorted by the soldiers armed with sub-machine guns.

Both the prisoners and their guards moved slowly, with sagging heads.

Lubentsov and Meshchersky looked at each other and in Meshchersky's eyes Lubentsov read a silent request, even a demand: act!

"They are not criminals," whispered Meshchersky fiercely. "They would not be taking criminals to the west. It's the guards that are criminals!"

Lubentsov nodded and said quietly:

"We'll soon see!..."

The rest happened very quickly. Sergeant-Major Voronin walked parallel with the road with an independent air, even somehow lazily climbed out of the bushes, went up to the cyclists riding in front of the column, and drawing himself up to his full height, quite off-handedly let fly with his sub-machine gun. Simultaneously several sub-machine gun bursts crashed out from behind. The prisoners scattered, then rushed together in a bunch and looked in surprise at what was going on around them. Men in green camouflage cloaks with red stars on their caps were darting silently and nimbly among the trees, uttering sharp cries in an unknown tongue.

At last they all came out on to the road—all of them tall, well built, sunburnt, green as the surrounding forest and seeming like creatures of the forest.

The men in convict garb did not have time to collect their senses before they found themselves in a leafy grove among the Russian scouts. And here there were horses champing at their bits. And it was free, sunny and warm, you wanted to throw off these prison clothes and perhaps put on those green camouflage ones, in which the scouts looked like heralds of the spring.

Lubentsov detailed two of the scouts to accompany the liberated prisoners to Divisional Headquarters. The

disarmed escorts were sent back with them under the guard of the former captives. The escorts accepted this rapid change of roles with dull obedience.

But Lubentsov and the scouts rode further south. They rode silently as before, as if nothing had happened, and only on Meshchersky's face was there a thoughtful, happy smile.

The northern outskirts of Falkenhagen met the little detachment with rifle shots and mortar fire.

"Back to normal conditions at last," remarked Lubentsov in a whisper as he leaped down from his horse.

The horses were led away into the wood, while the scouts climbed into the attic of a house, and for half an hour observed enemy activities in Falkenhagen. After noting down the firing points on the map Lubentsov gave the order to retire into the forest. They rode back at a sharp trot. Soon they met the forward units of the division and warned them of the German resistance at Falkenhagen.

On the fringe of the forest near the village of Schönewald Lubentsov noticed the Divisional Commander's car with staff officers bustling round it. The General himself, resting on the grass, was speaking by radio with the regiments.

"Here he is!" the General greeted his scout. "You make me envious. Nice to be gadding about on a horse in the Germans' rear, west of Berlin! Let's have your report!"

When he had heard Lubentsov's report the Divisional Commander said:

"Just received an order from Marshal Zhukov to get astride the 'Ost-West' highway by the evening. Here, this one, do you see?" he pointed at the map. "By the way, my congratulations, you have liberated some important anti-fascists. They wanted to meet you—drop in at the Political Department. Pavel Ivanovich is talking to them there."

Lubentsov went to the village. In the courtyard of the house occupied by the Political Department, the men liberated by the scouts had assembled. Soldiers and waitresses from the headquarters mess were moving tables and covering them with clean tablecloths.

Plotnikov, Oganessian and officers of the Political Department sat beside the freed men, talking to them. Then they invited everyone to the table. The division cook did his best to see that the foreigners should remember Russian hospitality for a long time to come.

When Lubentsov arrived, the liberated men stood up and overwhelmed him with expressions of gratitude. Then they all took their places again. Between Plotnikov and Lubentsov they placed a flabby old man, with a grey moustache and a mane of stiff, grey hair. Tears were rolling down his crumpled cheeks.

It was Edmond Hénót, a French Senator, a man with a world-wide reputation, many times a minister of the French Republic. But in the camps and prisons where he had languished since 1941 he had almost forgotten about his former high position. He had gone to seed very badly.

Now, however, seeing the respect with which the Russian officers treated him, and after drinking more than his measure of wine, he very soon came into his own and acquired the self-confident pose of the experienced parliamentarian. He began to talk loudly and so quickly that Oganessian, who did not know French very well, hardly had time to translate.

"You have emerged into the world arena," said Hénót, raising his arm. "Well, it's natural, quite natural. The white bear has crushed the black bear." (Hénót was referring to the arms of Berlin: a black bear on a silver field with two eagles—the black one, Prussian, the red one, Brandenburg.) "Yes, the white bear killed the black one and that was to be expected. In my heart of hearts I

always believed in your strength although I did not always express my conviction in public. . . . You and France are the bulwark of the security of Europe, you and France!" he brushed away a tear and exclaimed: "Beloved France!"

Colonel Plotnikov looked at Hénôt with sympathy mingled with a feeling of ill-defined irritation: why did the old man, only just liberated, orate loudly and pompously, even pat Lubentsov patronizingly on the shoulder just as if he had done him a great favour by allowing the Guards Major to liberate him. And to what purpose was all this high-flown talk, these banal "symbolical" comparisons? But then, Plotnikov thought, it is bad to pick on people's shortcomings at such a moment. What if this old man does boast a little after several years of an unendurable life! Good luck to him, thought Plotnikov, smiling gently at the French Senator.

The Colonel's face brightened when he turned round to his neighbour on the left—an elderly, emaciated man with grey hair and a slightly hunched back. This man spoke little, he only answered questions and did so in monosyllables. He understood Russian and even spoke it not badly—many of the prisoners in the camps, those who had foreseen the course of events, had learnt Russian from Soviet prisoners of war.

This man's face sometimes twitched nervously and, knowing his weakness, he would smile helplessly as if excusing himself for a habit acquired in prisons.

He was Franz Ewald, a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Germany, one of its outstanding underground workers and propagandists. He told Plotnikov his real name when he learnt that the Colonel was the Chief of the Political Department. Even Ewald's camp and prison comrades did not know his name, and they were very surprised when they heard

who he was. In the camps he had been known as Gerhard Schulze.

Gestapo agents had seized him in 1937 but they did not discover his real name,—he ranked as an ordinary communist "functionary," arrested in Wedding in a suspicious flat, that was all. True, at first, the Gestapo men suspected that he was not the man he pretended to be. One of the most zealous inquisitors spent a long time on him, employing every possible method of coercion, but he did not achieve anything. So Ewald remained Gerhard Schulze.

In the camp he created a widespread underground organization. He succeeded in establishing contact with the outside, found out about everything going on in the world, and distributed handwritten leaflets about events on the Soviet-German front. There were many members of the organization but except for five men—two Germans, a captured Russian officer, one French and one Czech Communist—no one suspected that "old man Schulze," who worked as a clerk in the camp guard, was the leader of the organization.

Recently, expecting the approach of the Red Army almost daily, Ewald had been planning an uprising of the prisoners and had managed to collect a large quantity of pistols and grenades, and even a few sub-machine guns, which had been brought into the camp in separate parts. But unexpectedly the camp had received an order to transfer a large group of prisoners, mainly Communists, to the citadel of Spandau. Ewald had spent two weeks in this ancient, gloomy fortress. Early this morning they had been taken from there to the northwest—they had gone on foot because there was no petrol in the prison.

Now he was sitting here, pale and quiet, with big drops of sweat on his deeply furrowed forehead, tired but happy.

He asked Plotnikov how the Soviet troops' offensive north of Berlin was progressing. This question especially interested him because in Rawensbrück camp were the wife and daughter of the murdered leader of the German Communist Party, Ernst Thälmann.

As he looked at all these emaciated, wasted men—the German anti-fascists—Lubentsov was happy merely to know that they existed. They were alive and fighting. Himmler's police had not broken them, they had not been poisoned by nationalist passions, nor disheartened by the victories of the fascist armies.

Plotnikov lifted his glass and proposed a toast:

"To Germany! Let us drink, comrades, to the Germany which you represent."

Franz Ewald rose quickly to his feet and said:

"To our liberators! To the Soviet Union! To Comrade Stalin!"

XVIII

On the "Ost-West" highway, the most important artery linking Berlin with the West, a fierce battle was in progress. The enemy, barricaded in the brick barracks among the stone lions and iron eagles of the military settlement of Lager Döberitz, was resisting desperately.

Leaving the Political Department, Lubentsov and Oganesyan hurried to the Divisional Commander, who was directing the attack from a low hill to the north of Döberitz. Through the telescope this highway was clearly visible—a broad asphalted main road, along both sides of which bordered smallish, densely populated towns.

At midnight the regiments broke into Lager Döberitz. Meshchersky rang up from there.

"The enemy's on the run," he said. "There's a prisoner."

Mitrokhin had "flushed" this prisoner out of a cuvette. They soon sent him to the Guards Major. The "tongue" was brought in by Mitrokhin himself, whose face had been scratched all over: the "tongue" had fought back desperately and wept while doing so.

Mitrokhin coughed in embarrassment, he was a little ashamed. The fact was that the prisoner had turned out to be a sixteen-year-old boy. At the sight of him the soldiers laughed loudly.

Lubentsov laughed too. The "tongue" did indeed look comic. A soldier's uniform hung on him as on a scarecrow, almost reaching to his knees. Enormous boots and a huge field cap completed the picture.

The "brat," as the scouts had nicknamed him, said that a few days ago the Berlin "Hitlerjugend" organization had been assembled at a sports stadium in a Berlin forest. Here, a hoarse, one-armed man, "Reichsjugendführer" Axmann, had spoken to them. He had said they were entrusted with the task of defending the western outskirts of Berlin, as the Russians had broken through in that direction.

Then and there the boys had been armed, dressed in soldier's uniform and some of them sent to Spandau and Pichelsdorf across the Havel. But this morning two battalions had been rushed to Lager Döberitz.

While Lubentsov was talking with the "brat," Sergeant-Major Voronin suddenly walked up to him and, fixing his sharp eyes on the "brat's" face, put out his hand and smoothed the numerous folds on the left side of the "brat's" chest. Among these folds Lubentsov noticed with surprise a new Iron Cross. The "brat" flushed and looked apprehensively at the Major.

Mitrokhin assumed a dignified air, the prisoner was not such a young oaf after all, and he need not be ashamed of having captured him.

Lubentsov smiled.

"What did you get it for?" he asked. The "brat" said that he had received the Iron Cross three days ago for wrecking a Soviet tank with a faustpatrone on the eastern outskirts of Berlin.

"Oh, you young son-of-a-bitch!" Lubentsov shook his head and asked the dismayed "brat" who had presented him with the Iron Cross. Lubentsov was even more surprised at the answer he received: stuttering and trembling, the "brat" said that the Cross had been presented to him by the Führer.

"What Führer?" asked Lubentsov.

"Hitler," muttered the "brat," scarcely audibly.

And he told how after the battle, in which he had unexpectedly succeeded in disabling a Russian tank, he had been summoned to Battalion Headquarters, placed in a car and driven through the rubble-strewn streets of Berlin to the centre of the city. He himself lived in Wilmersdorf and had not been in the centre of Berlin for a long time. Everything was in ruins there, and at night it was frightening to go about. Before he knew what was happening he found himself with some other people at the entrance to the Reichschancellery. He went down accompanied by SS men, and after passing through long corridors crowded with SS men he reached a small room. In this room stood a general, then a door opened and in came Hitler himself. Hitler muttered something inaudibly—at any rate the "brat" did not understand what the Führer said—then he pinned the Iron Cross on to the "brat's" chest. The "brat" did not remember any particular details; he noticed only that the Führer's hand trembled when he pinned on the cross. Then the SS men took the "brat" into the passage and all the way back kept on hurrying him:

"Faster, faster! Don't hang behind!"

He came out of the cellar on to Voss-strasse but the car which had brought him there was gone, and there

was no one about at all because the Russians were bombing the city, and the "brat" had to make his way on foot back to his battalion, right across Berlin.

With a grin the Major looked at this frightened little person, who three days ago had seen Hitler with his own eyes.

Gone were the days when the divisional reconnaissance officer had to squeeze information out of prisoners about the whereabouts of some German headquarters or regiment. Now they were concerned with the General Staff of the German army, with Hitler's headquarters, with Hitler himself.

XIX

Hitler's whereabouts were a matter of interest not only to Lubentsov but to the whole world. Perhaps, even in the little mountain villages of Ethiopia people were asking the question: what has happened to Hitler and where is he now?

During the battle of Berlin it was difficult for the Soviet soldiers to imagine that two or three kilometres away from them was Adolf Hitler in person, the man with whose name the mothers of the world frightened their children, whose whole appearance—the lock of hair hanging over his forehead, the beaky nose, the bags under his eyes, the hunched back—aroused the fierce hatred, the measureless loathing of the whole world.

But Hitler actually was in Berlin in the air-raid shelter under the building of the new Reichschancellery.

This huge, massive building, built in the style of the "Third Reich," cumbersome and ugly, occupied a whole block from the Wilhelmplatz, right along Voss-strasse to Hermann-Göringstrasse.

While the Soviet armies were taking Berlin, a grotesque and ridiculous tragedy was being enacted in Hit-

ler's air-raid shelter, if one can call a tragedy what was, in fact, the death agony of a gang of racketeers, of which one cannot even say: "It suffered defeat," but rather: "It was caught red-handed."

And of the fact that it had been "caught red-handed" almost everyone was certain. All who could, fled from the capital. Back in the middle of April Ribbentrop disappeared. Himmler, under the pretext of having to put things right in the west, set off in that direction, a little closer to the grave of his mystic "predecessor," Henry the Fowler. True, he did try, through his doctor, Gebhardt, to urge Hitler to quit Berlin. Göring just ran away and had not been heard from since.

Erich Koch, after escaping safely from East Prussia, arrived in Berlin and saw the Führer, but scenting that things were going badly he vanished, no one knew where. As a matter of fact no one even remembered him; after all, he was small fry. No one remembered Robert Ley, who had departed for the west, or the Minister for Eastern Territories, Alfred Rosenberg, who had decided not to wait for a meeting with the inhabitants of the East once under his care. The generals of the Supreme Command Keitel and Jodl and also Grossadmiral Denitz left Berlin at Hitler's order to collect forces for the salvation of the capital.

With Hitler there remained only two of the ringleaders of his state: Goebbels and Bormann. They were still relying on the possibility of stopping the Russians outside Berlin. Goebbels had succumbed to a fatalistic indifference which had taken the place of animal fear. He prepared poison ampules for himself and his family and would sit for hours on end in the cellar, starting every minute like a rabbit.

As for Hitler, he behaved like a baited animal.

As a result of twelve years of almost continuous good luck, of stupendous successes which at first he himself

could not understand, he had been seized by a megalomania. He was quite convinced of his own genius and infallibility.

Possessed of a mystic faith in his omnipotence he relied almost to the last moment on something happening which would at once change the course of events in his favour.

This madness had a certain hypnotic influence on the chosen SS men and Nazis surrounding him, trained in the course of twenty years to unquestioning obedience. For all the hopelessness of the situation—and they still did not know how hopeless it was—they themselves sometimes became infected with his idiotic faith in something supernatural.

This mutual deception, as shallow as a melodrama, gave life in the cellars of the Reichschancellery a tinge of continual hysteria, which took particularly grotesque forms among these fat, overfed SS hogs.

Sometimes in the evenings when it was quiet, it would seem to Hitler that life, history, time were passing away somewhere up there, overhead, above the eight-metre thick concrete roof of the shelter, and that he must sit here, very, very quiet and then everything would be all right. Life, time would pass away and perish but he, Hitler, would come up to the surface again, where everything would be as before: the Russians back home in Russia, the Americans and British driven from the continent. One had only to sit it out, and deceive time.

"No," he would answer abruptly when they suggested that he should quit the shelter and leave Berlin, in order to continue the struggle elsewhere.

He was afraid to come out into the light of day for in the depths of his soul he knew that everything was ruined and that he himself was ruined. But here in the cellar it was dark and calm; one could sit and wait and deceive time.

The explosions of shells and bombs, though hardly audible below ground, forced him to return to reality, and his hopes assumed a more concrete shape, now clinical rather than mystical: he must go on sitting here and meanwhile up above the Americans would clash with the Russians and they would smash each other like the warriors of Etzel and the Burgundian princes. And then he, Hitler, would come up to the surface again, to dictate his will to the world.

In the corridors of the air-raid shelter big rats sometimes appeared, which had in some unknown way penetrated into the place in spite of the fact that the floor was paved all over with tiles.

Hitler liked rats, he had made friends with them long ago, when he was in prison after the Munich putsch, and he was proud of it, comparing himself to the Pied Piper of Hamelin.

The desire to be a rat overcame Hitler one night in a minute of panic, when the Russians were reported to have forced the Teltow Canal. But then he thought in fright that as he possessed such great strength of will he might turn straight into a rat, and he began to whisper:

"Only for a time, for a week or two, no longer."

In the last days he often remembered his enemies whose prophecies concerning his final end proved to have been well founded. He lived again through the humiliating minutes of his first meeting with Hindenburg, when the aged Fieldmarshal refused to hand over executive power to him. He also remembered Ludendorf, who at Munich had treated his temporary ally with the ill-disguised scorn of a general for a corporal. Had these old men been alive, they would have said now: "Yes, we were right in our fears."

He would clench his teeth, filled with anger against the world and with hatred of his enemies and friends,

dead and alive. Even the thought of what Bismarck or Napoleon would have said had they been alive, tortured him.

The idea of the triumph of the Russians drove Hitler mad with fury. He would jump up and begin to pace rapidly about his domain, which had now shrunk to the dimensions of a rathole. He again began to rave and weep, threatening and blaming anyone and everyone for the defeat of his army.

He refused to understand how it was that his soldiers could not stop the onrush of the Red Army! Why did towns which he, Hitler, had announced to be fortresses, surrender? Why had Poznan, Schneidemühl, Küstrin, Vienna surrendered?

He cursed all his generals, all his soldiers and even his black guard—the devoted, fat-faced SS men. At these moments he hated the German people with a wild hatred.

In the evening the generals would come in silently with their leather map cases. He would squint hostilely at the maps. Gradually he came to hate them, these vile, rustling paper sheets with the red arrows showing Russian breaks-through. Were it not for these ill-starred maps, he thought, peering at them, everything would not be so bad, so disgusting, so shameful. But the red arrows kept coming nearer and nearer to the Reich capital, cleaving like knives the divisions and corps of the army he had once called "my army" but which he now called "your army."

The generals remained silent. But the Bolshevik armies kept drawing irresistibly nearer and they were not just armies but Bolshevik armies, the bearers of that ideology which Hitler hated from the bottom of his soul and against which he had fought all his life.

At the slightest hint of success energy woke afresh in him; he would throw off his torpor, draw the skin between his eyes into threatening folds, jerk his head quickly

from side to side as if posing for his photographer, Heinrich Hoffmann, who had long since fled, issue orders, cancel them immediately, and then issue new ones.

His decisions were taken quite without reason. The most monstrous thing about them was, perhaps, that he had lost all idea of the actual state of affairs. He was still playing at profound strategy though he was already only a bloodthirsty, hunchbacked dwarf, playing soldiers. True, these soldiers did shed real, warm blood.

For instance, he did not allow the German 16th and 18th Army Corps, which were being pressed into the sea, to be withdrawn from the Baltic coast, on the ground that if they were, Sweden might declare war on Germany.

"Why?" whispered the staff officers among themselves. "Why should Sweden enter the war?"

"And if they do come in, what then?" muttered others in surprise. "What difference can that make?"

The Führer knows better, yet another group consoled themselves, consoled themselves by habit, but they, too, would quietly express surprise and gesticulate hopelessly in the gloom of the dimly lighted corridors.

Not one of these men who had grown unaccustomed to the daylight knew the actual situation and they all thought it was the Führer who had the fullest information. And they dared not say anything aloud—Hitler was continually surrounded by his faithful followers and the heavy-jowled SS men of the "Adolf Hitler" leibstandarte.

When the Soviet armies came within a stone's throw of Berlin the army leaders suggested that troops of the right flank of the 9th Army fighting on the Oder should be recalled to reinforce the capital's garrison. Hitler forbade it: he said that in a few days he would launch a counteroffensive which would throw the Russians back across the Oder.

"Counteroffensive?!" whispered the staff officers, clutching their heads in the dark corners of the cellar.

To him it seemed that it was all because he, Adolf Hitler, could not concentrate, was unable to concentrate all his will on one thought: he must, must, must win victory. If one could concentrate and instil this thought into oneself entirely, utterly, everything in the world would fall into place.

And he went away into his bedroom, hunched himself into a chair, grasping the arms convulsively and staring at the wall.

But something spun in his brain and all round him, like an irritating fly, buzzing past, vanishing, distracting his attention. The interference was coming from a mighty, independent will, smashing to atoms all his plans and calculations. It was propelling forward the Russian tank spearheads, taking German towns and villages by storm, throwing back picked regiments of the German army like rubbish, ignoring with scornful indifference the hunchback with the little bailiff's moustache, sitting under eight metres of concrete roofing in the doomed city of Berlin.

XX

On the morning of the 22nd of April the chief of Hitler's personal bodyguard Brigadenführer of the SS Monke was called to the entrance of the shelter by one of the guards.

Two ragged, emaciated men were standing at the doorway. One of them with his arm wrapped in a dirty bandage shouted joyfully on seeing the Brigadenführer:

"Herr Monke!... At last!..."

Monke, huge and long-armed, peered at the stranger and examined him for some time. Then an expression of surprise gleamed in the watery eyes of the Brigadenführer and he said uncertainly:

"Bürke, is it you? . . ."

Bürke shook his bald head sadly and replied:

"Part of me. All my fat's been left on the other side of the Oder."

Oh yes! They had come from there. . . . Monke had heard something about Bürke's special mission in the east.

"And who's that with you?" he asked.

"One of my men," said Bürke. "Winckel. Don't worry, Herr Monke, he's a loyal man."

The "loyal man" and Bürke himself, incidentally, were searched by the SS men: that was the usual procedure and there was nothing to be offended at. Then they both followed Monke down the dimly lit corridor paved with yellow tiles like a station of the underground. The walls of the corridor were inset with massive iron doors, some of which bore inscriptions: "Chancellery of the Führer," "Dressing Station," "Command Post."

Everywhere there were SS men with sub-machine guns.

Monke stopped at one of the doors and pushed it open with his shoulder. In a smallish room with a low ceiling stood two tables, four bunks in two tiers had been built into the back of the room as in a prison cell. The two upper bunks were occupied by sleeping men.

The first thing that the two fugitives from across the Oder noticed here were bottles of wine and a heap of sandwiches on one of the tables. Monke motioned silently towards the chairs and just as silently nodded at the table of refreshments. After hungrily swallowing several sandwiches and gulping down some wine, Bürke told the Brigadenführer about his adventures. When the spy organization in the east had collapsed, he and Winckel had struck north in the hope that there would be a German break-through. As everyone knew the break-through had

not succeeded and they then made their way back southwards, pretending to be Poles. They had spent a long time in the forest, distressed and hungry. Then, a week ago—he could not remember the exact date because he had lost count of time in his wanderings—they had swum across the Oder. Just when they were swimming the river the Russians had noticed them and they had barely escaped with their lives to the other bank, where they soon found themselves in the town of Schwedt. From there they had walked, taken lifts in passing lorries and almost fallen into the hands of the enemy—Polish troops advancing on that sector. It was impossible to pretend to be Poles and they had just hidden in the forest, moving slowly southwest.

When he had finished his story Bürke asked the silent Brigadenführer:

“How are things?”

Monke shot a glance at Winckel and began to whisper something quickly in Bürke’s ear. The telephone rang and Monke went out. Bürke sat for a minute in silence, then said:

“Things are bad,” and added quietly, looking round at the sleeping men, “it was a mistake to get ourselves in here. . . . But . . . drink, Winckel.”

Soon Monke returned accompanied by other officers of the SS. They greeted Bürke—he knew nearly everyone—and Bürke repeated his story.

Winckel stared at the SS men in trepidation. They all looked like heavyweight boxers. Besides, he knew that they were associates of the Führer himself, and this circumstance embellished them in Winckel’s eyes with a mysterious and terrible halo.

Winckel wanted to sleep very much and everything that followed appeared to him as if through a fog. He and Bürke were led somewhere and given military uniforms. They changed, then they were again led along the dark

corridors. At last he found himself in a large room almost entirely filled with double-tier bunks.

As soon as Winckel lay down, his sleepiness vanished. In spite of his fatigue he was unable to get to sleep for a long time, and kept going over in his mind the events of the past days. It seemed to him that he was still swimming in the dark waters of the Oder and around him bullets were whistling and tearing into the water. Then he again recalled with what a feeling of joy he had neared Berlin and how surprised he had been on entering the town. Winckel had not been in Berlin since 1942 and the city had suffered terrible changes during these years. It was almost entirely destroyed, cluttered with ruins, the inhabitants had dazed eyes, and no one walked: they all ran, hiding in the shadow of the houses. The Russians, meanwhile, had already begun to shell the city with their long-range artillery. Several times Bürke and Winckel had to go down into an air-raid shelter and into the underground stations. They would listen in silence to the conversations of the Berliners, such free conversations (nothing short of Bolshevism!) that Bürke's fists clenched and his eyes went bloodshot. But he held himself in check and only looked with hatred from under his thick brows at the inhabitants of the capital, muttering:

"You all ought to be strung up. . . ."

But now even the iron-willed Bürke himself spoke without particular inspiration about National-Socialist ideas. He even allowed himself disrespectful remarks about the leaders, and once (true, this was on the other side of the Oder) he had expressed doubt about the military talent of the Führer himself.

He no longer promised Winckel an Iron Cross.

In one of the air-raid shelters on the northeastern outskirts of Berlin, somewhere in the vicinity of Weissensee, the inhabitants of the capital were making no bones about the inevitability of capitulation.

"It's time to stop," said a tall man in a leather jacket, who looked like an electrician or a chauffeur. "It's senseless to resist."

The women supported him eagerly. In this shelter there happened to be three Russian girls who had been deported from Russia. They were sitting with sombre faces, separate from the others and looking silently at the Germans. And these girls were treated with such attention that Bürke again clenched his fists. They were offered some food and one woman even gave them her blanket: the girls were badly dressed and the shelter walls were dripping. Bürke snorted something to himself.

Soon several SS men entered the cellar and with them ten puny youths from the "Hitlerjugend" dressed in soldiers' uniforms, which were too big for their underfed bodies. A hush fell on the cellar. But when the artillery bombardment had stopped and the SS men with the lads went to the entrance, a woman's low voice sounded in the stillness, saying distinctly:

"Child murderers!"

Winckel could have sworn that the SS men heard this cry. But they pretended not to hear and only increased their pace.

Bürke and Winckel slowly went on towards the centre, and passing along the long Greifswalderstrasse across the completely destroyed Alexanderplatz, came out at the Spree, crossed over the Kurfürsten bridge, then crossed the Kupfergraben Canal. Here they wandered for a long time among the side streets, ruined beyond recognition, and finally, having sat in shelters through two more raids by Soviet aircraft, they reached Wilhelmplatz.

The hotel "Kaiserhof," where the Führer had lived until his accession to power—a fact drummed into the heads of children in every German school—gaped with black windows, behind which lay piles of rubble and mangled bedsteads.

Anti-aircraft guns were set up in the garden, hidden in the thick foliage near the statues of Frederick the Second's generals. Skirting the garden the travellers caught sight of the new Reichschancellery.

As Winckel lay on the hard bunk in the underground barracks of the "Adolf Hitler" leibstandarte he thought how at one time, having met the people closest to Hitler, he might well have counted on a fine career. But now, unlike the SS men here, who were demoralized by the underground life and hoping no one knew for what, Winckel had seen too much in the past weeks to nourish even a spark of hope in the possibility of the salvation of the Hitlerite state.

A little later Winckel went to sleep and slept for nearly twenty hours on end. He was awakened by powerful tremors. He jumped up. Russian shells were falling somewhere nearby.

In the next room the SS men were drinking schnapps. Apparently something serious had happened; the SS men were chattering excitedly. Bürke appeared and explained everything. Big formations of Russian tanks had appeared unexpectedly, no one knew from where, on the southern outskirts of Berlin. The General Staff of the Ground Forces had hurriedly abandoned their underground quarters near the small town of Zossen and had arrived here in the air-raid shelter.

Fighting was also in progress on the eastern and northern outskirts, already within the city boundary.

Bürke was now helping Brigadenführer Monke to form an "Adolf Hitler" volunteer corps, whose task was to defend the Reichschancellery in case the Russians should break through the other defence sectors.

Bürke was dressed in a new uniform and looked almost as "gallant" a warrior as before, in the town of Soldin. Yesterday he had received from Hitler himself the rank of "Obersturmbannführer," as he told Winckel with

some complacency. But Winckel knew the SS man well by this time and could not help noticing the hunted expression in his little eyes.

Bürke said that Winckel would be given "the honour" (Bürke himself grinned at this) of commanding a company of the Volunteer Corps.

For the time being Winckel sat without anything to do. Then he was suddenly called to the Chief of the General Staff of Ground Forces, Infantry General Krebs.

The "General Staff" was quartered in two little hutches behind the same heavy steel doors as all the hutches in the shelter.

Here in an armchair sat a short fat General with a flabby, unshaven face. It was Krebs. Next to him by the telephone three officers were writing.

On learning that there was an agent who had arrived from the east, in the shelter, Krebs had decided to question him. He asked whether the Russians were going to attack south of Stettin.

Winckel answered that in all probability they would. On the Oder there were many troops, and more and more were approaching along the roads to the Oder. He had even heard the rumble of tanks there too. There must be very many of them. Krebs listened to him distractedly, apparently without the slightest interest.

An SS man came in and said:

"Herr General, the Führer is calling you."

The General buttoned up his uniform and went out.

The officers at the next table kept talking on the telephone. From their conversations Winckel realized that the position had grown worse. Russian mounted scouts had appeared on the "Ost-West" highway. A motorized detachment of Russian scouts had broken into Kladow.

"They are cutting us off," said one of the officers.

Another officer on another telephone was asking about the situation in Berlin.

All information about the progress of Russian troops in Berlin was received by the General Staff in a rather original manner. An officer looked through the pages of the Berlin telephone directory, dialed a number and said: "Frau Müller? Excuse me. . . . You live in Steglitz? Will you be kind enough to say if the Russians have been at your place."

The answer came back:

"No, they have not, but people say they are close, at the Teltow Canal. My neighbour, Frau Kranich, has come from Sedanstrasse, her mother-in-law lives there. . . . The Russians have been there. Who's speaking?"

The officer put down the receiver. He was ashamed to tell Frau Müller that it was the General Staff speaking. Then he would note down the information of Frau Kranich's mother-in-law on the map and look for a suitable number in some other district of the capital in which Headquarters was interested.

From a telephone in the region of Prentzlauerberg a man's voice answered:

"Hullo!"

The officer asked his question and suddenly dropped the receiver as if he had burned himself.

"A Russian," he said in a whisper.

"What are you so scared about?" grinned another officer. "They don't shoot over the telephone."

Soon the General came back. He was not alone: with him was another General, also fat but tall. They were both pale.

"Well, what's to be done?" Krebs spread out his arms. "You tell him, Burgdorf. . . ."

Burgdorf was silent.

"We are in a huge cauldron," went on Krebs. "All roads are cut off. . . ."

In the evening information arrived about the beginning of the Russian troops' offensive south of Stettin. The Russians had succeeded in forcing the Oder on a broad front, their tank units had advanced several score kilometres.

The same evening Winckel for the first time heard the name "Wenk." In the underground quarters of the Tiergarten, where Winckel had been taken by Bürke, he heard an alarmed and then continually repeated question:

"Is there anything from Wenk?"

XXI

General of armoured troops Wenk commanding the 12th Reserve Army in the vicinity of Magdeburg had received an order from Hitler to open his front to the Americans and come to the aid of the capital. The whole Reichschancellery was thinking and talking of nothing but Wenk. Never had any general been as popular as this utterly unknown Wenk.

Even Hitler himself was filled with hope. His step grew firmer and a gleam appeared in his eyes. The pronoun "I" again became the leading part of speech in his conversation: "I cannot abandon my capital," "I have decided to stay here," "I shall save Europe."

He again called up the generals, sent out radio messages to Rechlin, Flensburg and Berchtesgaden, to Keitel and Jodl, Denitz and Himmler.

One morning there was news from Göring. The Reichsmarshal sent a radio message in which he proposed that Hitler should hand over supreme power to him, Göring, in view of the fact that Hitler was no longer capable of wielding it.

After reading this radio message Hitler burst into tears, fell on the bed in a wild fit of hysterics, and when

he had finally calmed down a little, gave an order over the radio that Göring should be arrested, and that in the event of his, Hitler's, death the Reichsmarshal should be immediately strangled.

The last straw was added by Himmler, who, as Hitler was informed on the same day, had on his own initiative begun surrender talks with the British and Americans.

Hitler fell into a state of prostration and only refrained from committing suicide because he was relying on Wenk: as soon as Wenk arrived and the Russians had been thrown back across the Oder, he, Hitler, would have the traitors executed—condemned immediately to a slow and terrible death.

Horror at the idea that somebody might outlive him deepened the wound in the soul of this vile creature. He would have given much to have everything perish together with him, and the thought that someone would remain alive on earth after his death was unbearable to him.

But on the day after all these shocks a radio message at last arrived from Wenk. The 12th Army had reached Lake Schwielowsee and occupied a place called Ferch on the shore of the lake, south of Potsdam.

On receiving this message Hitler, in spite of the cautious warnings of Krebs and Burgdorf about the weakness of the 12th Army, overflowed with complete and unshakeable faith in the future.

He retired to his bedroom to think out how he would reward Wenk. Perhaps he should change the name of Voss-strasse, where the Reichschancellery stood, to Wenkstrasse. But what was "Voss"? He remembered the word hazily but could not for the life of him imagine what or whom it signified. He glanced into the encyclopaedia in a bookcase, but the volume "V" was not there.

SS men ran about the corridor asking:

"Who is Voss?"

Someone remembered the name from his schooldays, but only dimly. They decided to ask Goebbels. Very disturbed, the latter came to the Führer. Goebbels was pale, and had grown even thinner. His uncombed hair stuck up in a tuft. His wide mouth was tightly compressed: the approach of the Russians had stopped up that fountain.

"Voss"? he asked in surprise. "Ach, Voss!... The translator of Homer.... Yes, yes, Johann Heinrich Voss...."

Goebbels left and Hitler again began to think how he might distinguish Wenk.

It is a very important question, he insisted to himself, very important. It must be decided at once.

No, let the translator of Homer remain. Culture should not be abased—that would be out of place at present.

Yes! He had it. Here next door, Hermann-Göringstrasse! It had been called Königgrätz before—in honour of the victory of Prussia over Austria at Königgrätz. Now it should be renamed. Not even the memory of that fat swine should remain, that tailor's dummy of a Reichsmarshal!

Hitler decided to give Wenk the title of Reichsmarshal. Then he thought of introducing a new title—"saviour of the Reich"—but then he hesitated: was it not too much for Wenk and would it not detract from the role of those... yes, yes, those who had remained in Berlin at such an unusually difficult moment?!

Perhaps "hero of the Reich" would be better.

Heavy shelling by Soviet artillery in the vicinity of the Reichschancellery shook the air-raid shelter to its foundations. Everything began to tremble. Plaster fell off the ceiling. Instead of air the ventilators began to belch rubble and acrid dust into the underground rooms. Communication with the town was cut. The Russians had reached the Wilhelmstrasse.

"Saviour of the Reich" would, perhaps, be more correct, and nothing terrible would come of it if Wenk did

receive the title. After all he was not a politician but a soldier.

The badge of the order would be thus: a gold cross with oak and laurel leaves, on a gold chain. One might give up the swastika emblem: that would appease the great western powers. An amnesty for the Jews who were still alive and the creation of a well-appointed ghetto for them. An American-European economic society for the exploitation of the resources of the eastern territories—something in the nature of the old East India Company, owned half privately, half by the government, with full powers and large capital. Police functions would be undertaken by Germany or, at a pinch, by Germany and France together. America would receive the controlling block of shares.

He began to sketch on a sheet of paper the emblem of the new order—it was not for nothing he considered himself an artist!

The artillery bombardment soon ceased. The Russian guardsmen had been stopped a kilometre from the Reich-chancellery.

Then the staff officers came in with a report. Hitler listened to them and at last gave the order to the 9th Army to leave its positions and go immediately to join forces with Wenk's army. Whereupon he decided that "saviour of the Reich" was, after all, rather too much and resolved finally on "hero of the Reich."

Soon a new Commander-in-Chief of the Air Force appointed in Göring's stead, arrived—General Ritter von Greim. Hitler promoted him to Fieldmarshal and ordered him to fly back and organize air support for Wenk.

The Commander-in-Chief of the German Air Force flew away in a "Füeseler Storch" aircraft, which took off along the Charlottenburg highway. There were no longer any aerodromes in Berlin: Tempelhof had been occupied

by Russian guardsmen, Nieder-Neuendorf, Dalgow and Gatow were also in Russian hands.

"Never mind, Wenk will arrive soon," said the SS men everywhere, cheering up.

"He is already at Potsdam!" they rejoiced. "At Potsdam!..."

XXII

The town of Potsdam is in the eastern part of the peninsula formed rather strangely by the river Havel and by various lakes, of which there are a dozen. The winding Havel bounds it on the south and flows away in a northwesterly direction. On the north this unusual peninsula is cut across by a canal running from lake Schlenitz to Fahrland lake, which in its turn is joined by a channel with lakes Krampnitz, Lenitz and Jungfernsee. Thus Potsdam is separated from the surrounding country by an almost continuous water barrier.

The town of Potsdam has for long been the symbol of the Prussian army and the old Prussian bureaucracy. At one time it was the residence of the Prussian king Friedrich-Wilhelm I, who reigned in the first half of the 18th century. His son Frederick II, called the Great, built palaces there in imitation of Versailles.

Both kings are buried in the garrison church, famous for the melodious chime of its bells.

After coming to power, on the 21st of March, 1933, Hitler stood in this same garrison church, before the tomb of the Prussian kings, and opened the new Nazi Reichstag. In this way he emphasized the succession of the old Prussian military-bureaucratic state by the Third Reich.

All this information was supplied to Taras Petrovich by Colonel Plotnikov, and thus provided some balm for the soul of the General, who had wanted to take part

in the capture of Berlin, not a wretched little place like Potsdam.

On receiving the order to take Potsdam, General Sereda with Lubentsov and other officers drove out on a reconnaissance to the village of Neu-Fahrland situated between two lakes, in a picturesque locality. This was the best place to cross on to the peninsula because the channel joining Fahrlandsee and Lenitzsee was comparatively narrow.

But the Germans were well aware of this fact too. On taking a look at the village of Nedlitz, which lay on the opposite side of the channel, and at the race course west of Nedlitz, Lubentsov discovered rather considerable fortifications and noticed the busy movements of German soldiers and artillery.

He reported this to the Divisional Commander and added that the Germans would undoubtedly put up serious resistance at the crossing.

After thinking for a moment the General puckered his eyes and said:

"But we'll make them look silly."

He ordered the Chief of Staff to arrange for only one battalion to be left in this sector to make a show of preparing for the crossing.

"Let them make as much noise as possible," said the General. "They can cut down trees, shoot into the air. Let them mess about on the bank and, above all, shout a lot. . . ."

The General himself gave the Battalion Commander full instructions on this subject.

The Battalion Commander was that same giant who had "not been ill since birth." The two Orders of the Red Banner on his broad chest had increased to three.

"We'll make a noise, Comrade General, don't worry!" barked the Battalion Commander.

The General smiled: that one certainly would make a noise!

At dusk the regiments made a forced march through Potsdam forest and concentrated at midnight on the bank of lake Jungfernsee, right opposite the northern outskirts of Potsdam. A special battalion of amphibian lorries arrived to help the division. Major Veselchakov's battalion was loaded on to them. Standing on the bank the General watched the soldiers and listened to the lapping water. From the northwest rose a terrible din and thunder of fire: that was the giant Battalion Commander and his men.

Here all was quiet—only the sound of lapping water and the dull whirr of engines. The whirr of engines faded into the distance. Nothing could be seen on the lake. At last, desultory firing reached the General's ears. Apparently Veselchakov had gone into action but so far the General could not do anything to help him. Other battalions began to embark on pontoons and rafts. The water rippled away from the rafts as they were launched. The folding rafts were hurriedly loaded with anti-tank guns.

The General listened. The whirr of engines could be heard coming back across the lake—the amphibian lorries were returning. The firing on the opposite bank grew more and more fierce.

At last, red rockets flashed in the darkness indicating that the First Battalion had succeeded in gaining a foothold. Half an hour later a whole firework display of green rockets went up. Two more battalions had gone ashore on the opposite bank.

The General was worried most about the artillery. There were still no white rockets. At last they too shot up into the sky, and the General said:

"We'll go too."

He went down to the water's edge, to the pontoon waiting for him.

They pushed off. Rockets were showering green and red stars all round. The artillery thundered.

"At last!" whispered the General.

Flashes of fire appeared now here, now there. The German artillery had gone into action too. The General's pontoon grounded at the same time as two others. The soldiers, still some distance from dry land, leapt into the shallows and splashed towards the bank.

At daybreak the bridgehead secured on the northern outskirts of the town was already three kilometres deep. The Divisional Commander ordered his men to advance on the town. He himself went to the castle of Cäcilienhof, one of the turrets of which Lubentsov had fitted up as an observation post.

It grew lighter and lighter. From the window of the tower the Major followed the course of the battle. The division was forcing its way forward over terrain thickly crowded with *vorwerks*, villas, hothouses and gardens. The left flank was moving along the shore of Lake Heiligersee and soon, having subdued the park buildings and captured the Marble Palace, it burst into the town on Moltkestrasse. With a swift lunge the right flank regiment hurled the Germans from an advantageous position on Pfingstberg hill and seized the garrison hospital and the Uhlan barracks north of the town. In this way the German units defending Potsdam were divided by a wedge driven between them. Taking advantage of the fact that units of the enemy confronting him were diverted to the south, the giant Battalion Commander ferried his battalion across on anything that came to hand, and struck from the north.

The enemy's defence was utterly disorganized and at one o'clock in the afternoon Chetverikov's regiment was fighting in the centre of the town. After seizing Wilhelmplatz and forcing the canal, the troops broke through into another square, just where the garrison church stood.

The war was still on, the Germans with faustpatrones barricaded in the houses were still snapping back.

By the evening the firing ceased and the Divisional Commander dictated his report on the capture of Potsdam. Colonel Plotnikov decided to drive round the town: he was curious to see the places of historical interest in the Prussian residences. He took Meshchersky with him. After visiting all the regiments he ordered guards to be mounted on all historical monuments, in particular Sans-Souci and the New Palace.

Near the ruined city fortress standing on the bank of the Havel, was the Parade Square, the very one over which Prussian soldiers in pigtails had once goose-stepped past Frederick. They drove along Breitestrasse to the garrison church. Its famous bell lay on the upturned cobble stones, dislodged by the explosion of a bomb. Inside the church it was quiet and dark. An old German, wearing a high hat, had followed Plotnikov and Meshchersky in. He offered to tell them about the places of interest in the church and, if they wished, to guide them over the whole town.

Plotnikov was about to agree to this when suddenly from somewhere nearby came the sound of firing and the thunder of mortars. There was commotion on the streets. Soldiers came tumbling out of the houses to assemble.

The Colonel and Meshchersky exchanged worried glances. The town of Potsdam at once ceased to exist for them as a centre of various historical monuments—it immediately turned into a military objective defended by units of the division fighting nearby.

They got into the car and rushed to Divisional Headquarters. Here nothing certain was known yet. They did not catch the Divisional Commander: he had left hurriedly ten minutes ago with Lubentsov and Colonel Sizykh for the south. Very heavy machine-gun fire was coming from there, undoubtedly a real battle.

Plotnikov and Meshchersky immediately set off after the Divisional Commander. The car overtook infantry and divisional artillery hurrying in that direction.

The Divisional Commander had taken up his position in Wildpark station. He was sitting at the telephone in the hall of a kind of show pavilion, which, however, had in a short time acquired the familiar appearance and even the smell of an observation post.

"Well, esteemed tourists," grinned Taras Petrovich at the sight of the alarmed Plotnikov, "have you looked over all the palaces of the Prussian kings? The disgraceful fascists give one no time at all for culture...."

From the vicinity of Geltow village south of Potsdam groups of armed German soldiers had appeared half an hour ago and engaged the outposts of Chetverikov's regiment.

No one—neither General Sereda, nor Lubentsov, nor Chokhov—was yet aware that at this moment their path had crossed Hitler's; the forward detachments of the 12th Army under General of Armoured Forces Wenk were trying to break through from Geltow, hastening to Hitler's aid. Hard-pressed by our battalions they were now retiring slowly under fire towards Geltow.

Learning that Lubentsov had gone on ahead with the scouts, Meshchersky at once set off after him.

The big forest—or rather, park—south of Potsdam was swarming with soldiers. The firing kept dying down, then increasing again.

On the fringe of the forest Meshchersky stopped. The roofs of Geltow gleamed in the distance. Lines of Soviet soldiers were moving slowly across the green plain towards the village. Machine guns were firing fiercely. Here and there columns of dust and smoke shot into the air like black trees springing from the ground. Then came the sound of explosions. That was the Germans, driven back to Geltow, firing at the plain with mortars.

On a mound in a clearing near the edge of the forest Meshchersky caught sight of Chetverikov, Migayev and other officers of the regiment. Chetverikov, his bow legs planted wide apart, was staring through his binoculars.

"The First and Third Battalions have reached the outskirts," shouted a telephone operator from a dugout below.

Migayev told Meshchersky that Lubentsov had just been here and had gone on ahead.

Meshchersky was very angry with himself for wasting time looking at the buildings of Potsdam and being absent when he was needed.

"How bad!" he muttered reproachfully to himself.

He found the scouts only when the battle was already over. German soldiers, swimming and in boats, were fleeing back across the Havel and Lake Schwielowsee.

The Guards Major stood on the bank of the Havel staring through his binoculars at the opposite bank, where there was a town with a strange and very significant name: Kaput. Captain Chokhov and Major Veselchakov were standing beside Lubentsov smoking silently. Infantrymen and scouts were resting all round.

"They ran away a bit too early, somehow," said Lubentsov thoughtfully, lowering his binoculars. "They've left their mortars behind...."

The flight of the Germans was soon explained. From the opposite bank came the intermittent roar of many engines. A few minutes later tanks with red flags on their turrets appeared on the straight streets of Kaput. One tank drove right up to the bank and stopped just opposite the place where Lubentsov, Chokhov, Veselchakov and Meshchersky were standing.

The tankmen, apparently, noticed them. The hatch of the tank opened and out of it popped a head wearing a helmet. The tankman started examining the opposite bank attentively,

Lubentsov cupped his hands to his mouth and shouted loudly:

"Hullo there, la-ads!..."

"Hallo-o!"

"Where're you from, la-ads?..."

"First Ukrainian, la-ad!... And you-oo!?"

"First Byelorussian," shouted Lubentsov.

The tankman waved his hand in sign of welcome, then shouted across:

"I salute you!"

And the tank shuddered as it fired into the air. A deafening explosion echoed over the forests, lakes and rivers.

"Berlin's in the bag," said Lubentsov. "Better tell the Divisional Commander."

General Wenk's 12th Army fled to the southwest, abandoning its weapons. In the next few days it dispersed like smoke.

XXIII

On the morning of the First of May Lubentsov at last decided to go and see Tanya.

That day the streets of Potsdam were especially busy. Red banners hung everywhere, and soldiers' meetings were being held, at which Stalin's First of May order was being read, and the words of the order rang out over the Prussian capital.

"The stern times when the Red Army was fighting back the attacks of enemy troops near Moscow and Leningrad, near Grozny and at Stalingrad, are gone, never to return."

"The World War, which was unleashed by the German imperialists, is drawing to a close. The collapse of Hitler Germany is a matter of the very near future. The Hitler bosses, who fancied themselves the rulers of the world, have now been left with a broken pitcher."

Stalin addressed his soldiers with the call:

"While beyond the borders of your native land, be exceptionally vigilant!

"Continue to uphold the honour and dignity of the Soviet soldier!"

At the Soviet Commandant's office stood a huge queue of German men and women, who had come here by order of the Soviet Command to surrender their weapons. The Germans stood ceremoniously holding sporting guns in their hands a little away from themselves, so that no one should suspect them of unwillingness to lay down arms.

The sun was shining particularly brightly today.

Colonel Vorobyov's division was in Spandau, and Lubentsov, accompanied by his orderly, set off in that direction.

After crossing the canal Lubentsov plunged into the thunder and roar of the main roads.

Again people of all nationalities were tramping in all directions. Again wandering groups of liberated people on bicycles, in carts and on foot were on the move.

Freed prisoners of war of the allied armies marched on in rejoicing crowds: French, Belgian, Dutch and Norwegian soldiers in uniforms worn to shreds during their captivity.

On huge country wagons, easily the size of buses, among fair-haired Englishmen, flashed the turbans of colonial soldiers and the motley kilts of Scots guardsmen. Among the pale faces of American airmen released from prison one could catch glimpses of the black faces of Negroes. At this moment of rejoicing and universal equality the Americans did not shun the approach of Uncle Tom's descendants. On the contrary, at the sight of the passing Soviet forces the Americans and British demonstratively embraced their Negro and Indian companions-in-arms, and the coloured men smiled, flashing their white teeth and thinking, probably, that thus it would be for ever.

At a crossroads in a big village stood Oganessian, who had been told by the Political Department to explain to the allies the Soviet Command's orders about the routes they should take.

Oganessian's hand was limp from thousands of handshakes. All the stars on his shoulder tabs, not to mention the star on his cap, had passed into the possession of the liberated prisoners of war—Americans and British were souvenir hunting. He had only just managed to save his Order of the Red Star from one American, particularly anxious to collect souvenirs.

"See this?" asked Oganessian, shaking the Guards Major's hand warmly. "Surikov or Repin are needed here! No smaller talent will do!... And where are you bound?..."

Lubentsov muttered something vague and hurriedly said good-bye.

The nearer Lubentsov came to Spandau the more perturbed he grew. Just before they reached the town he lost his nerve so badly that he nearly turned back. He reined in his horse and looked at Kablukov.

"I meant to tell Antonyuk..." muttered Lubentsov, but what he should have told Antonyuk he did not say, for the simple reason that there was nothing to tell.

At last he relaxed the reins and Orlik cantered on further. They passed the military road "Ost-West" and rode into the western suburbs of Spandau, where the Divisional Headquarters was situated in one of the houses near the railway.

Here the artillery cannonade coming from Berlin was clearly audible. The horizon over Berlin was in flames. Soviet aircraft kept on appearing in the sky, flying in to bomb the last strongholds of German resistance in the capital of Germany.

Lubentsov spent two hours at Divisional Headquarters. He studied in detail the situation on this sector, put

the information down on the map for a report to his Divisional Commander and kept delaying, unable to make up his mind to ask where the Medical Battalion was quartered.

Colonel Vorobyov came to the help of the Guards Major. Noticing the scout he said:

"Ah, an envoy from Taras Petrovich! Well, what's the news?"

Lubentsov told him about the German divisions south of Potsdam which had tried to come to Berlin to help Hitler.

Vorobyov was surprised:

"So he is in Berlin after all? Sure he's got nowhere to go now, the son-of-a-bitch!"

"What's your trouble?" asked Lubentsov, noticing the Divisional Commander's bandaged arm.

"Wounded near Altdamm. It's healing already. I have only just come from the last dressing at Falkenhagen."

Lubentsov took his leave and galloped to Falkenhagen. On the way, he noticed several times on the military signposts a red cross with the inscription: "Rutkovsky's outfit," so he was on the right road. He arrived in Falkenhagen when it was already getting dark. . . .

Near the houses where the Medical Battalion was quartered Lubentsov reined in his horse, leapt down, stood still for a minute and said to Kablukov:

"Wait for me here."

He walked towards the house and hesitated as he reached the entrance. At last he mounted the steps decisively and walked in. The first room was empty. He knocked at a door. A woman's voice asked from behind the door:

"Who's there?"

Lubentsov answered:

"Can you tell me where Koltsova is?"

The same voice asked someone else quietly:

"Do you know where Tatyana Vladimirovna is?"

Beads of perspiration broke out on Lubentsov's forehead.

"In the operating room probably," came the answer.

"No," said the first voice, "all the wounded have been treated already. . . . She's in her room."

The door opened slightly and a buxom brunette with very black hair and slightly slant eyes came out. The evening twilight filtered through the windows. Lubentsov could still make out her face. She could not see him well: he was standing with his back to the windows. Looking fixedly at him, she asked:

"And what do you need Koltsova for? You don't seem to be wounded."

Her voice did not sound too friendly.

Lubentsov said:

"No, I am not wounded. I have to see her about something else."

"What?" asked the woman abruptly. "Appendicitis? Rupture?"

At that moment the front door opened, someone came in and Lubentsov felt distinctly that it was Tanya.

The woman with slant eyes said:

"Someone is asking for you here."

Then Lubentsov turned round. He did not see Tanya's face, but he saw her silhouette in the open doorway.

He said huskily:

"It's me, Tanya. Hullo."

"Who?" asked Tanya and gasped faintly.

Then it suddenly grew light, the other woman had brought a lamp from the next room. The light from it shone on Tanya's face, white as paper.

Then they both went out into the street. Somewhere on the eastern horizon flames were blazing and guns booming, but Lubentsov and Tanya did not hear or see anything. Then the narrow, yellow fingernail of a young

moon appeared in the sky and they noticed the moon and stopped.

"It is you?" asked Tanya and, looking into his face, she repeated this question several times, then said: "How happy I am that you are alive! You have probably got to leave now, you have so much to do. . . . I'm afraid to let you go in case you should again. . . . How stupid I am, I say—again. . . . I just can't get used to your being alive. You were wounded, weren't you?"

She said all this quickly and incoherently.

"Let us go somewhere where it is dark," she said boldly, she did not want to bother now with conventions, "I want to kiss you."

They went behind the nearest house, she put her arms round him and kissed him.

"What shall I call you?" she said, when they came from behind the house. "I've never called you by name. Then, near Moscow, it was 'Comrade Lieutenant,' and at our last meeting in Germany 'Comrade Major.' I will call you Sergei—there. You call me Tanya. . . . Don't say anything. I am afraid you will say something not right. It's happiness, our meeting—and that's all. Let's imagine for a minute that there's no war now and we are just strolling down the boulevard in Moscow. Oh, how I want to see normal children floating toy boats in puddles, playing with the sand! . . . You know, when I heard that you had been killed I thought that I too was partly to blame. They told you something bad about me. . . . Yes, yes, I know. And it seemed to me that it was because you were hurt that you went under fire. Of course, that was silly, but I thought that."

Carts trundled past them slowly, soldiers went by unhurriedly. And they were all happy on the threshold of peace, people looked at the lovers with misty, dreaming eyes, wishing them from the bottom of their hearts a joyful, peaceful life.

"My orderly is waiting for me with the horses," Lubentsov remembered at last, and they went back to Falkenhagen.

Kablukov and the horses were still there.

"Now we'll have some tea," said Tanya. "We'll put the horses in my yard, there are some sheds there."

Kablukov looked questioningly at the Guards Major, but Lubentsov was not looking at him, only at this woman. She went on ahead and Kablukov led the horses after her. Near one of the houses she stopped, opened the gate herself and said:

"Here. This is where I live."

She and Lubentsov went into the house. The mistress of the house came out to meet them; she was an old German woman with a fine face, who was wearing spectacles, and who seemed to Lubentsov to be a very nice, hospitable old soul.

Tanya went out with her into another room. Then she came back, laid the table, brought in army rye bread and tinned meat. The mistress made tea. Tanya's emotion transmitted itself somehow to her and the old woman bustled round the table, muttering something very quickly under her breath. When she left, Tanya went into the yard and called Kablukov. They all sat down at the table but only Kablukov ate. Glasses of tea stood in front of Lubentsov and Tanya but they neither drank nor ate, just looked at each other.

Someone knocked at the door. A woman's head popped in. The nurse had ostensibly come to Tanya on business, but both Tanya and Lubentsov understood that she had come here out of curiosity, and she herself knew that they understood. She reddened and said something, but Tanya could hardly make out what her request was.

The nurse went away and after a short time another woman's head popped into the room. And this girl, too, found some excuse for coming in.

Kablukov stood up, thanked his hostess and said that he had to go to water and feed the horses. Tanya jumped up, too, and said she would go and ask the landlady to find some hay. But Kablukov replied that he would ask himself. Tanya offered to show him where the water was, but Kablukov said that he would find it himself, and went out. Tanya sat down and began to say something about the landlady having some hay. Tanya had seen the hay herself.

But to Lubentsov everything was clear—everything that was happening to her and to him. He profoundly understood the significance of every word, every gesture, Tanya's and everybody's, and like a clairvoyant he read the thoughts of others exactly.

Then there was a knock and someone else came in, but Lubentsov was not bothered, he did not even look at the newcomer, he was staring at Tanya surprised at the unusual light, which shone from her huge, grey eyes.

It was Glasha who had come in. She at once recognized the Major, who had often been with Veselchakov in the battalion. She said, looking guilty:

"Oh, Tatyana Vladimirovna, forgive me, what a big fool I am! I did not think at all that the Guards Major was a friend of yours. I knew that he was not killed. . . . I told nearly all the nurses about it, how the Guards Major spent three days among those Germans in the town and then helped our battalion to advance. . . ." Hesitating for a minute, she asked quietly:

"Do you know, Comrade Major, how my Veselchakov is? Is he alive? He has stopped writing altogether, I don't know what to think. . . . He's forgotten about me."

"He is alive," said Lubentsov. "I saw him yesterday. Alive and well."

"Well," said Glasha sadly. "Smoking his head off probably."

"Smoking? Not noticed it . . . believe me, hadn't noticed it. If I had known, I would have tried to keep a look out."

What nonsense I'm talking! thought Lubentsov. I'm losing my head. . . .

"Why should he smoke?" said Tanya. "And he has not forgotten you. How could he forget! No, no, that would be very strange! . . ."

She thought, just as Lubentsov had thought, that she was speaking foolishly. Then she realized that she should invite Glasha to the table.

"Sit down, Glashenka," she said.

But Glasha refused.

"I must go," she answered quietly, "I've a lot of work on hand."

She had no work on hand, of course, but Tanya did not object, she did not want to see anybody but Lubentsov.

Glasha left, but a minute later that same slant-eyed brunette, who had met the Major so unhospitably, came in.

Even now she gave him a hostile look and asked rather challengingly:

"I hope I'm not intruding?"

"Not at all, not at all!" fussed Tanya. "Sit down, Masha, and let me introduce you. Major Lubentsov, my old acquaintance. Maria Ivanovna, commander of the hospital platoon, and a friend of mine."

"Aren't you going to the convent?" asked Masha.

"No, go yourself," replied Tanya.

"I thought you wouldn't be going today," said Masha, emphasizing every word.

Pretending not to notice Masha's accusing tone, Tanya explained to Lubentsov:

"There's a convent here and a children's orphanage. When the fighting began here, Colonel Vorobyov had the children driven away in lorries. . . . Then they came back

and the Divisional Commander ordered our commissariat to supply rice and flour to the orphanage. . . . They even gave them a few milking cows. The nuns were very surprised, they had not expected Bolsheviki to have a weakness for children. . . . We, doctors, keep an eye on the orphanage, there are a lot of sick kiddies there—dystrophia. Well, we have been there five evenings already, taking them glucose.”

Glancing at Maria Ivanovna's knitted brows Lubentsov suddenly burst out laughing and then said to excuse himself:

“Forgive me, Maria Ivanovna, I remembered how interested you were in my illnesses.”

“Well, what of it!” said Maria Ivanovna dourly. “Yes, I asked, and as a doctor had a right to ask, what was wrong with you. And—yes, I did use the word ‘rupture’ . . . There is such an illness and a doctor can ask about it.”

Tanya gave her ringing laugh and then, unexpectedly, Masha herself laughed too. She kissed Tanya quickly and ran out of the room.

They were again left alone. Tanya said in a trembling voice:

“You probably have to go soon?”

Lubentsov could have stayed till tomorrow, but he did not dare to say so. That would be too much.

He said:

“Yes. May I ask you to come and see me if you can, in Potsdam. The General invited you. You can see the town, the palaces and parks. It's very interesting.”

She said, looking at him confidently:

“All right. I will do everything you wish.”

“Come straightway in the morning.”

“All right, I will come.”

“And how will you come?”

“I'll come.”

They went out into the street, leaving their glasses of tea untouched on the table.

Stars glittered in the sky, paled by the blazing glow over Berlin.

Kablukov was on the steps smoking. Hearing their footsteps he stirred and made a movement to leave.

"Saddle up," said the Major.

Kablukov went to saddle up, while Tanya and Lubentsov stood beneath the stars, pressed close together. Then the clatter of horses' hoofs was heard, and the jingle of bridles. Kablukov came up with the horses.

On the way back Lubentsov and his orderly were silent. The Major was thinking how strangely she had said those words: "I will do everything you wish." Those words, he thought, had bound them together for ever, and everything in the world now seemed to him easy and simple.

The horses galloped fast. It was already past midnight. The 2nd of May had come.

XXIV

Next day, the 2nd of May, Tanya was unable to come, because of unexpected and important developments.

On the night of the 2nd of May a large group of German troops, about thirty thousand men in all, with self-propelled guns and armoured troop carriers, broke out of Berlin westwards through the districts of Wilhelmstadt and Pichelsdorf.

Lubentsov had not yet arrived in Potsdam when the first messages came through from Gatow and Kladow, reporting that the roads were crowded with masses of armed Germans.

The whole division was alerted. In the thick darkness before dawn, only rarely pierced by the beams of pocket

torches, the soldiers climbed aboard their lorries and drove off northward to block the roads leading out of Berlin to the west.

The telephones at Headquarters were ringing continuously. More and more details arrived about the escaping Germans, who were moving in dense columns, avoiding towns and villages whenever possible.

Lubentsov roused the scouts, who were sleeping in the house opposite. They jumped up quickly sorting out their sub-machine guns and grenades. A lorry was already waiting for them. They leapt in and the lorry drove off to the north.

It grew light. One village flashed past after another. The scouts' lorry drove over a temporary bridge, near which some sappers had taken up defensive positions, into Fahrland. North of this village, on a hill, Lubentsov ordered the driver to stop. The scouts jumped down and followed the Major to a highway nearby.

The scouts did not have long to wait. A column of Germans, no less than a thousand strong, appeared round the bend. In front of them was an assault gun of the Ferdinand type. A second gun of the same type brought up the rear of the column. The black crosses on the self-propelled guns reminded Lubentsov of the past years of war.

He watched the column attentively, then turning to Meshchersky he said:

"Give them a volley."

The scouts fired a volley. The Germans, thrown into confusion, scattered over the low ground, running and crawling. The self-propelled guns halted and fired three times at a nearby railway station.

In a few minutes a battery caught up with Lubentsov. The artillerymen manned their guns and fired several rounds into a village, where the Germans were hiding.

A soldier ran up and informed the Major that another column numbering about a thousand men had appeared further east.

The soldier pointed toward a wood, into which the Germans had only just withdrawn. Lubentsov sent Voronin and two other scouts there, and Mitrokhin with three scouts to the village where the first column was hiding.

Voronin soon returned with the news that there were, in fact, about three hundred Germans in the wood. The artillerymen trained one of their guns on to the wood and fired twice. After a minute the Germans began to scurry out. They ran in various directions, gesticulating wildly.

Lubentsov awaited the return of Mitrokhin, who reported that the Germans had begun moving again, although no longer in a solid column. They had broken up into several groups. Lubentsov told his men to get into the lorry, and drove back to the Commander of the Division.

The Divisional Commander was listening to the Commander of the Army, who was calling him up from the vicinity of Wachow, south of Nauen, where fighting was also in progress against escaping enemy columns.

After talking to the Army Commander, the Divisional Commander said:

"We shall have to do some more fighting before the war's over. . . . More men killed, more blood shed. The Army Commander says that these are the desperate ones, who are afraid to fall into our hands. . . . They know that it will be bad for them! They're off to the Americans. But the Berlin garrison is capitulating, everything is finished there."

Lubentsov shrugged his shoulders.

"I've had a look at them, they aren't so bold. In my opinion we ought to send out envoys to the Germans

with white flags, and suggest that they surrender. . . . It's a pity to put still more men in the grave."

The General rang up the Political Department. Plotnikov agreed to the Guards Major's suggestion.

"That's right," he said. "We ought to try it."

The "mercy movement," the desire to avoid unnecessary bloodshed, arose among the troops quite spontaneously. Then it was approved by the Military Council. From nearly all divisions Soviet envoys, who knew even a little German, were sent out to invite the Germans to surrender.

The Guards Major drove out in an armoured car with a white flag.

He had also sent Oganesyán and Meshchersky with white flags to the village of Gross-Glienicke, while he himself drove northwest.

In the first village, he ran into some of our supply troops. They had been through the first battle of their lives—and not just a battle, but hand to hand fighting—with Germans. There were wounded among them.

"I was delivering flour for the divisional bakery," a fat man in a torn tunic, with a rifle in his hands, looking very warlike and thirsting for blood, was telling the Major, "and suddenly, what do I see? Germans on the move! Down we go and begin to shoot. Saved the flour. . . . You don't need to go to them with white flags. Katyushas are what you need!"

Lubentsov went on further, crossed the highway and the Paretz-Nauen Canal. There was unusual excitement everywhere. Soldiers of the rear units, catching sight of the Guards Major with a white flag, heaped him with information:

"There's a column just over there!"

"There are Germans in that wood."

"About two hundred men crawling behind the embankment."

Lubentsov stopped the armoured car near the wood, where according to the soldiers, there was a large group of Germans.

Holding the white flag in his hands, the Guards Major walked quickly towards the trees.

As he went deeper into the wood he began to shout loudly and distinctly:

"Deutsche Soldaten! Das Kommando der Roten Armee..."*

Lubentsov did not have time to finish before a shadow flitted across the wood and a German came out of the trees towards him. He was a bespectacled, lanky, unshaven man with a senior corporal's stripes on his tunic.

He came forward, looking warily into Lubentsov's face.

Lubentsov at once sent him back into the wood, explaining that the German was expected to bring along his comrades as well.

Ten minutes had not passed before the bespectacled German brought out a score of other Germans. Lubentsov sent these back too.

"Gehen Sie," he called after them, "und zurück mit andere..."**

His assumption was fully justified. They wandered through the wood, and in the distance he could hear them shouting and calling to others, and then saying something to them insistently and very quickly.

At last a large group of men appeared, almost a hundred of them. They had left their weapons in the wood. They stared at the Russian officer as attentively and warily as the first bespectacled soldier had done.

Lubentsov took the prisoners with him to a vorwerk

* German soldiers! The command of the Red Army...

** Go, and come back with others...

with a brickkiln, surrounded by a fence. Lofty old chestnut trees towered behind the fence.

The armoured car drove slowly behind the prisoners and stopped in a meadow not far from the fence.

There was a lot of noise coming from the vorwerk. Civilians, most of them women and children, trickled out of the houses but looked at the prisoners from a distance, not daring to approach them.

Lubentsov appointed the man in spectacles as their senior. He was more excited than anyone and did not leave Lubentsov for an instant.

Accompanied by the bespectacled German, the Major went up to the women and told them that it would be a good idea for them to feed their fellow countrymen.

At first the women did not understand what this peace-loving Russian with the white flag was saying to them, but when Lubentsov repeated his words, they burst into noisy chatter and ran off into the houses and cowsheds. In a short while they reappeared carrying loaves of bread and enamel pails with milk splashing in them.

This cheered the prisoners up considerably. The Germans sat down on the grass round the pails and began to pour out the milk into their messtins, realizing at last that messtins were now more necessary than sub-machine guns.

Neither did they forget to thank the Russian officer, for the bespectacled German had told them who had "organized" their milk. The women and children stood round, looking at the prisoners with sympathy and at the Russian walking among them—with appreciation and respect; the younger women were even inclined to coquetry.

If one adds to this the fact that over the lofty chestnut trees and over the green meadows and over the excited faces of the German men and women hung a very blue, spring sky, and that the sun was shining brightly

and merrily, one can imagine what a joyous and very significant picture unfolded before the eyes of Sergei Lubentsov.

Meanwhile, the man in spectacles had eaten a little and again volunteered to go and bring in prisoners. Lubentsov ordered him to select a few assistants from those "veterans" who had been the first to respond to the appeal of the white flag.

The Major invited the children standing round open-mouthed also to run into the wood and deliver to peace and milk the Germans who were still hiding there. The children, of course, were overjoyed at being given such a task. They found some long poles, tied white handkerchiefs to them and, holding them high above their heads, ran into the wood.

After a few minutes another large group of German soldiers came out of the wood, led by a Lieutenant-Colonel wounded in the shoulder.

The Lieutenant-Colonel went up to Lubentsov, saluted, unbuttoned his holster and handed over his pistol. The Guards Major took the pistol in his hands and said half-questioningly:

"Also, Frieden?"*

"Gott sei Dank!"**

Lubentsov appointed him commandant of the whole camp, which already numbered over three hundred men. From time to time stragglers appeared. A captain wandered up, then an oberleutnant with an Iron Cross on his chest. The prisoners sat on the grass, winking blissfully in the light of the morning sun.

However, Lubentsov began to get alarmed at his being among almost five hundred German soldiers. There was not a single Soviet soldier in sight, only a junior sergeant in blue overalls, the driver of the armoured car.

* Well, peace?

** Thank God!

He too was rather worried and, coming up to Lubentsov, said:

"There's an awful lot of them already. . . . We could do with a guard."

Lubentsov thought for a moment and suggested:

"Get into the car and drive to that village with the damaged church. I saw our gun battery there. Let them send up at least a dozen soldiers."

The armoured car roared off. Lubentsov was left alone. And the Germans kept on coming in. The bespectacled Corporal and his volunteers plied back and forth to the wood and always returned with a good haul.

Lubentsov had a talk with the Lieutenant-Colonel. The German told him that Hitler—so at least it had been announced—had committed suicide in the Reichschancellery the day before yesterday, the 30th of April. Berlin had capitulated when it became clear that further resistance was impossible. As for the Lieutenant-Colonel himself, who had been the commander of an anti-aircraft regiment stationed in Grünewald forest, he had decided to take part in the break-through, because he was from Thüringen and wanted to reach his home. Many other soldiers and officers, too, had tried to break through to the west with the same object in view. True, the Lieutenant-Colonel could not but agree with Lubentsov's remark that quite a few Germans wanted to go west in the hope of avoiding punishment for their past crimes. Yes, the Lieutenant-Colonel had met quite a few well-known SS men on the road and also civilians from various Nazi organizations. In answer to Lubentsov's question whether these people considered that the Americans would not punish them, the Lieutenant-Colonel became rather confused and, frowning at Lubentsov, answered that perhaps many did think so.

It grew warmer and warmer. White clouds floated slowly across the bright blue sky.

Just then a burst of sub-machine gun fire was heard in the wood, and the bespectacled Corporal appeared. He was walking rapidly, almost running. Reaching Lubentsov he started saying something quickly. Lubentsov only caught three words of his whole speech:

Kaum lebendig 'raus . . . *

At length Lubentsov understood that not far from the edge of the forest there was a large group of men who had only just arrived, armed with sub-machine guns and unwilling to surrender. When the Corporal had begun to remonstrate with them, one of them had fired a burst from his sub-machine gun.

Lubentsov waited for the return of the armoured car, in which sat several Soviet soldiers with rifles, then he left them to guard the prisoners, took the white flag, and went towards the wood. Behind him at a distance followed the boys with poles on which the white handkerchiefs fluttered gaily.

Loudly addressing the trees, behind which he knew men were hiding, Lubentsov proposed that the Germans should surrender.

The forest maintained a hostile silence. Lubentsov raised his voice and repeated his proposal, adding that the Soviet Command did not desire bloodshed and therefore proposed that the German soldiers should surrender.

Again there was silence. Only the wind stirred the leaves of the trees. Helmets, rifles and pistols were scattered all about on the grass.

At last, somewhere on the left two Germans stood up and walked towards Lubentsov. Saluting him as they passed, they went on in the direction of the *vorwerk*. Lubentsov took three steps forward. Ahead he glimpsed a hollow and beyond it nestled a small log cabin. The men must be hiding in that hollow—the scout's sensitive ear could not deceive him.

* Hardly got out alive.

No one, however, came out, and Lubentsov had already decided to return to the vorwerk when a German appeared from the hollow; almost simultaneously a shot was fired, the German fell down as if poleaxed, and then came a short thunderous burst of fire.

The Major jumped back in surprise, noticed at the last moment how the green leaves were falling from the lower branches of the trees, clutched at his heart and collapsed on the grass.

XXV

During the last days of Berlin Konrad Winckel lived in the Tiergarten shelters with Bürke. Like everyone else there, he was of the opinion that only the arrival of Wenk could save the capital. Neither he nor the others knew that Wenk's army was weak and that the legend about the coming of Wenk was nothing more than the latest fruit of Hitler's imagination.

But by the 29th of April it was already clear that Wenk would not come. Whispers went round that the 12th Army had stuck south of Potsdam and was fighting heavy defensive actions there. As for the units of the 9th Army which had gone to join up with Wenk, they were already surrounded in the vicinity of Wendisch-Buchholtz.

In the evening of the 29th of April Bürke went off to the Reichschancellery. When he returned he was gloomy and depressed.

The whole district was thundering and rumbling. The Russians had reached the Spree north of the Reichstag, forced the Landwehr Canal, while from the west they had taken Alexanderplatz, broken through on to Schlossplatz and were fighting for the emperor's castle.

There was no stopping them. They penetrated the underground works of the town, appeared unexpectedly

out of the underground stations, filtered through the ruins, dragged their guns almost on to the roofs of houses.

"What does the Führer think?" whispered Winckel.

In reply Bürke snorted:

"He doesn't think any more."

Bürke pulled two glass ampules out of his pocket and looked at them, his eyes just as glassy as these little bottles.

"That's what they've issued us," said Bürke. "The last refuge of the Black corps. . . ." He concealed the ampules in his pocket and roared out: "Finished! It's all over and done with! If I could only get my hands on that bitch of a fortuneteller, I would carve her up in slices, the old hag!"

He told Winckel in a whisper that today the Commandant of the Garrison General Weidling had been to the Reichschancellery and announced to Hitler that further resistance was impossible, and suggested that he should leave the city.

"And what happened?" asked Winckel.

"He refused. Of course, his game's up already. There's nowhere for him to go. For history it looks better to kick the bucket in the capital than on some crossroads. . . ."

Bürke was in despair and, although he hid this from all the others, he did not hide it from Winckel, whom he trusted.

The shelters grew silent as the grave. The men blinded themselves with schnapps and waited for death.

At three o'clock on the next day an Obersturmführer crawled into the Tiergarten with an order to obtain two hundred litres of petrol and take it to the Reichschancellery. They began to pour petrol into cans from the cars and armoured troop carriers standing about everywhere here. They scraped up one hundred and sixty litres. After whispering to the Obersturmführer Bürke came back to Winckel and said:

"They are going to burn the Führer's corpse. . . . He has poisoned himself or is poisoning himself now. I'm going."

This time Bürke did not return for a long time. Other men who came in from Voss-strasse said that Hitler had poisoned himself and that in the evening General Krebs would go to the Russians for a parley.

The death of the Führer had no affect on anyone. They all remained indifferent, squatting about, munching something and waiting for the end.

A cloud of black smoke lay over Berlin. Round the Reichstag the firing never ceased. More and more wounded were being brought away from there to the Charlottenburg Highway. The Russians stormed the Reichstag and soon a red Soviet banner gleamed above its glass cupola. The Germans in the Tiergarten could see it, too. A mighty Russian "hurrah" reached them. Fighting started in the zoological garden, wounded were coming from there too. They said that the Russians had taken five thousand prisoners there. The Germans were laying down their arms and surrendering. The ranks of the Tiergarten defenders also grew thinner. Many escaped under cover of night.

Winckel was sitting in the shelter, dozing. He did not care what happened to him. Late at night Bürke arrived. With him there were several SS officers.

"Finished," said Bürke.

The next day it was announced that an attempt at a break-through would be made from the Berlin forest. General Weidling was conducting talks with the Russians about capitulation. Goebbels had poisoned himself. Bormann had disappeared somewhere. After midday Winckel and Bürke with other SS men and officers set off westwards. Scrambling over the ruins, trembling with fear at the thought that at any moment the Russians might appear at a crossroads, they passed through Charlotten-

burg. Making their way across a demolished strip of railway line, they finally found themselves in the Berlin city park, among deserted sports grounds and empty, boarded-up kiosks.

Large crowds had gathered near the Reich stadium, but it was quiet. They sat about in groups, talking in whispers.

Bürke, who was usually extremely active, was restraining his ardour and keeping quiet, his big, hairy ears cocked to the conversation.

The conversation showed that all these men in green greatcoats assembled here could be divided up into three groups.

The first group, consisting of young boys of the "Hitlerjugend" and front-line soldiers, was making for the west because that was the order: they had been told that the German army still existed and was still defending itself in the vicinity of Nauen, and that it was a soldier's duty to break through to give support.

The men belonging to the second group, more numerous than the first, knew that the situation was hopeless and that Germany had suffered defeat. But these men's homes were across the Elbe. Here there were Bavarians, men from the Rhineland, inhabitants of Westphalia, Schleswig, Hesse and other German territories in the west. They only wanted one thing: to get home to their native villages and towns.

Finally, the third group consisted of SS men, active Nazis, various petty führers and leisters: the big shots had bolted long ago. At one time these men, following Hitler, had cursed the American plutocracy. But now they preferred to be captured by the Americans rather than by the Russians, hoping, not without reason, that the Yanks would treat them far more liberally. Capitalists and plutocrats suited them much better than Communists.

It was this last group that was leading the breakthrough, deceiving some and encouraging others.

Bürke, who belonged, of course, to the third group, did not try to make himself conspicuous. He was afraid of the Americans, but not so much as he was afraid of the Russians. There were too many crimes on his conscience for him to be able to take refuge even there, in the west. The French, for example, must remember him well from the time when he was working as a kind of executioner with Stülpnagel in Paris. He had been in charge of the shooting of hostages there. Much French blood had been shed by those big, hairy hands, which now lay so despondently on the wet, dewy grass.

Bürke shivered—not from cold, of course. It was warm and still. He would have given much now to exchange biographies with this dejected fellow Winckel sitting beside him, who could even doze off, damn his eyes!

Then Bürke became aware of a man holding forth under the next tree, where a number of men had gathered, two of them SS acquaintances of Bürke's. To Bürke's surprise the tall man in a felt hat and fine gold-rimmed spectacles, with a whitish moustache cut à la Hitler, was dressed in civilian clothes. He looked very peaceful among the soldiers' uniforms. He was talking fairly loudly and even self-confidently.

"The Americans are a businesslike people. I'll never believe that they want to destroy us, they must understand that we are the only defence of the western world against the Bolsheviks. I am certain that the American leaders love the Communists as little as you and I."

Bürke raised himself heavily from the grass and went up to his SS acquaintances.

The man in civilian clothes asked:

"Has anyone any matches? My lighter has run out of

petrol." He chuckled: "Lack of strategical raw materials is one of the misfortunes of our poor fatherland."

Someone obligingly handed him a lighter, and Bürke pulled a packet of cigarettes out of his pocket,—his pockets were stuffed with cigarettes he had taken from Monke in the air-raid shelter under the Reichschancellery.

"Ah, you have cigarettes!" exclaimed the man in civilian clothes. "You are rich! I've been smoking bad tobacco for three days. . . . Thank you, Herr . . . er. . . ."

Someone prompted him:

"Obersturmbannführer Bürke."

"Obersturmbannführer?" asked the man in civilian clothes. "Well, let us say Herr Lieutenant-Colonel. It sounds better nowadays."

"I don't object," said Bürke grimly.

"Lindemann," the man in civilian clothes introduced himself.

"Lindemann," repeated Bürke. "I thought I knew you but I just could not remember."

Otto Lindemann was a big industrialist, a member of the directing boards of several firms and banks.

"I met you," went on Bürke, "once in Berchtesgaden and several times in Berlin. I was working with the Führer then. Afterwards, when I was in Paris. . . ."

These reminiscences did not arouse particular enthusiasm from Lindemann and he interrupted the SS man with a certain sadness:

"Yes, Herr Lieutenant-Colonel, those were the days. All over now. The late Führer was a great man, but. . . ." He paused and then changed the subject. "I don't remember in what connection I happened to hear of you recently. . . ." Someone in the darkness whispered something in Lindemann's ear and he said: "A-ah! I remember! . . . I remember! . . . Circumstances connected with financing special tasks of the Reichsführer of the SS. . . ."

Gradually it grew dark. Not far away in the darkness

nightingales began singing, and Lindemann with a sigh quoted the first lines of the poem:

"Were I but a tiny bird...."

At last the signal to move was given. They all stood up. Bürke and Winckel went with Lindemann.

Bürke and Lindemann positively glowed with liking for each other. The industrialist's composure appealed to Bürke, who decided that Lindemann's confidence had some real foundation. Lindemann was an influential man, who had grown very rich on war contracts and the expropriation of Jewish concerns. He was a member of the directing board of the Bremen Company, Focke-Wulf, and of the Opel Joint Stock Company in Rüsselsheim. He probably had important connections in Western Germany and might, perhaps, prove useful to Bürke.

As for Lindemann, he had heard a good deal about the big, grim, red-faced SS man. In the present difficult circumstances Bürke's powerful fist and his sub-machine gun might come in very, very useful.

Lindemann had fallen into the "Berlin cauldron" by chance. He and his secretary had arrived from Bavaria on the 15th of April. The next day the Russian offensive had begun, and Lindemann, in spite of having much business to do, was already about to leave, but before leaving he had visited the Reichschancellery. Here he discovered that the Führer was in Berlin. This reassured Lindemann, and he decided that if the Führer was in Berlin then he must have enough forces to hold the Russian thrust. Many highly-placed personages had assured Lindemann that Berlin would not be surrendered under any circumstances. General Burgdorf, Hitler's military aide, whispered to Lindemann that if the capital were surrendered it would be surrendered to the Americans, only to the Americans.

Reassured, Lindemann had sent a telegram to his wife to say that he would be delayed for a few more days

and would then fly home. He ordered a plane. The rest is known. The Russians reached Berlin five days after the start of the offensive. All the aerodromes fell into their hands. The Americans, on whose arrival Lindemann, and not only Lindemann, was relying, were far away.

Lindemann obtained a car and drove out of Berlin to the west, but near Lager Döberitz the car had been fired on by the Russians who had just appeared on the "Ost-West" highway, and he had to return.

Now, all Lindemann's hopes hung on his reaching the Americans. He had lived in America for a long time both before and after Hitler's accession to power. His American friends, including Henry Ford's son Edsel and the heads of General Motors, were sufficiently influential, thought Lindemann, to protect him from persecution. After all, he, Lindemann, had not taken part personally in the SS atrocities. He was an industrialist, and if the concerns of which he was one of the directors worked for the war, then that was quite understandable to every businessman. Business undertakings need profit. True, Lindemann had taken part in the financing of Hitler before his accession to power, and later he had more than once done Hitler and Himmler a number of services. But after all, that was quite natural: Hitler's rule and his drive towards war had brought great gains to industry, and that ought to be clear to any businessman. As for the demagogues in America and other countries, well, Lindemann hoped that they would soon be calmed down.

True, Lindemann was a little alarmed by the rumour that his name was on the list of 1,800 war criminals from among the leaders of industry and the banks. But after all, he was not Baron Kurt von Schröder, not Krupp von Bohlen, not the privy counsellor Schmitz from I. G. Farben, not Arnold Rechberg, not Kurt Schmitt—the direct and open accomplices of Hitler. He was not a politician, his sole concern was—profit.

Otto Lindemann dreamed of seeing, at last, the stars and stripes of the American flag. Crowds of men moved slowly through the forest. From ahead came the roar of the assault guns taking part in the break-through.

Having reached Pichelsdorf the forward units engaged the Russians, and since the Russians, in spite of the unexpectedness of the attack, held firm, the huge crowd had to divide up into comparatively small groups, and each group began its own hazardous task of breaking through to the west.

XXVI

Here and there short skirmishes were fought, the German columns breaking out of Berlin grew thinner, split up, flowed round towns and villages, spread out over the forests and marshes and stubbornly continued to advance.

The column which included Lindemann, Bürke and Winckel met with stiff resistance at Seeburg. Two of its self-propelled guns were put out of action by the Russians. It had to split up into small groups and filter through ravines, valleys and marshes to the cherished goal in the west.

Bürke found himself leader of a detachment of three hundred men. West of Seeburg they engaged a Russian covering force, which almost put the Germans to flight. But just then it was discovered that the Russian force only numbered twenty men in all. Bürke stopped the flight of his men and they hurled themselves at the Russian soldiers lying by the roadside. The Russians withdrew. Bürke rushed forward with his huge paws and grabbed a young Russian lad with a head wound. The fighting had subsided but Bürke kept on strangling the already dead, young Russian and punching his face with his huge, red fists.

Lindemann turned aside—he could not bear the sight of blood—but he was very pleased by the daring and ferocity of his bodyguard.

After crossing the road they again made their way on through woods and dales. The further they went towards the west the more daring Bürke became. He marched ahead of the others, huge, evil and ready for anything.

Towards morning they came out on to a railway. All of them were dead tired, but fear and the desire to force their way on supported them.

They swam across a canal. Soaked and hungry, they reached a road north of the village of Buchow-Karpzow. Here they came under fire from a Soviet battery mounted not far away on a hill. Rifle shots rang out on all sides. With difficulty they got out of this trap and dragged themselves to a village, where it was very quiet. Some Russian girls in uniform were washing linen. Catching sight of the Germans the girls ran into the houses, whence came several shots. Then two Russian soldiers came out of a house and walked towards the Germans, shouting something. Apparently they were suggesting surrender. Bürke replied with a burst from his sub-machine gun. One Russian fell, the second took cover.

Bürke had a flask of wine in his bag and instead of drinking it himself, he treated Lindemann to it. This restored the failing strength of Herr Director.

By ten in the morning Lindemann was hardly able to move. Bürke announced a halt in the forest. Everywhere excited voices could be heard. The Germans who had hidden here earlier were shouting to each other, quarrelling and holding meetings. Then children appeared carrying white flags with the news that a Russian officer had sent them and that he said that they should surrender and it would not be bad for anyone, but good for all of them. They would all be fed, and the wounded would be treated. And prisoners were already being fed with milk.

Bürke barked at the children to go to hell and threatened to shoot the lot of them. The children ran away in fright.

Then a German soldier appeared, who tried to persuade the men to give themselves up. Berlin had capitulated, Munich had surrendered to the Americans without fighting, resistance was finished.

Bürke let fly with his sub-machine gun. It grew quiet.

Lindemann had rested a little and Bürke decided to move on further. He said:

"Let's go, don't worry, we'll make it. Keep going, Lindemann. You'll be all right with Bürke. I was told by a Parisian fortuneteller that I should die a general. . . . If you were in Paris you must know that old hag. . . . If we can only get to the forest west of Brandenburg. . . ."

"You are a real man, Bürke. Come on," said Lindemann, trying to look cheerful.

At that moment Bürke noticed among the trees a Russian officer with a white flag. It was a Russian officer with fair hair and blue eyes. His blue eyes showed up especially because his face was tanned. He was standing in a clearing, looking into the darkness of the wood. In his left hand he held a white flag and the sunlight streaming through the leaves splashed golden spots on the cloth.

He said a few words and paused. Behind him German children appeared with white flags tied to long poles. They were treading on tiptoe, inquisitive and wary.

Two Germans on Bürke's right stood up and walked towards the Russian. Their feet rustled softly through the grass. A helmet, which one of them kicked with his foot, clattered.

The blood flooded slowly into Bürke's face and slowly drained out of Lindemann's. And all of a sudden, quite unexpectedly, someone lying next to them stood right up.

Bürke looked round. Winckel with his hands raised was walking towards the Russian officer. His sub-machine gun was left lying on the grass.

Bürke screeched and raised himself on his left hand. Winckel's narrow shoulders stuck up in front of him. Bürke raised his sub-machine gun and fired.

Without a glance at Winckel, who had fallen face downwards, Bürke gritted his teeth and fired a short burst at the Russian, at his white flag, at the children standing in the distance. The leaves torn off by the bullets fell slowly to the ground.

Bürke grabbed Lindemann by the arm and they ran into the depths of the wood.

Breaking across country they soon caught sight of the Havel. Through the dense tall rushes of a marsh they made their way to the damp lowland near Brandenburg and here, breathing heavily, they sat down to rest.

Lindemann fell asleep at once, but Bürke could not sleep. The wind stirred in the rushes, and Bürke imagined that it was the Russians crawling towards him, nearer and nearer, blue-eyed and sunburnt, like that officer. Everyone around him was sleeping, muttering, sighing and cursing in their sleep.

Bürke's long arms dangled limply between his legs. In an hour he woke up Lindemann and the others, and said that it was time to move on.

Lindemann groaned:

"What are you talking about! I haven't the strength to get up!"

"Do you want to get caught by the Russians?" asked Bürke. "Well, stay behind. I'll go on alone."

"Come on," grumbled Lindemann.

They set off. It was quiet all round. A fingernail of the new moon shone in the heavens. Lindemann was grumbling:

"If only we can get to the Americans!"

"What's so good about the Americans!" said Bürke grimly. "They are also enemies."

These words roused Lindemann to anger, and he began speaking quickly:

"You don't know a damn thing! Your brains have been stuffed up by that Führer of yours and his clique! They talked you silly about plutocrats and capitalists! But do you know what put the Führer in power, who gave him money for his election campaign?! We! We! The heavy industry people!"

"Quiet," said Bürke.

Lindemann went on, lowering his voice:

"Let me tell you straight, not a little part of the Führer's success was due to American cash! Aha, you're surprised? That's what Dr. Goebbels told you? The Opel factories, if you want to know, belong to General Motors! The Lorenz Radio Company is a branch of the American Telephone Company—in case you want to know the truth! The Americans have shares in Focke-Wulf. Yes, yes, the aeroplanes of Reichsmarshal Göring which bombed the Americans were built on American money! Remember that, enemy of the plutocrats! Money has no citizenship, and gold knows no frontiers."

"Quiet," said Bürke.

"But our poor fatherland," continued Lindemann in a whisper, "it still has a future... Under the aegis of a more flexible political power, of course!... The Führer was a great man but there was a lot he did not understand!... It was his lack of flexibility that ruined him. A correct internal policy but a stupid foreign policy!..."

On the third day of their wanderings Bürke and Lindemann sighted the Elbe in front of them. By this time eleven men were left out of the whole group: three SS men, one minor official of the Ministry of Interior, one "leiter" from the "Hitlerjugend" and four soldiers born in Thüringen and Hannover.

Bürke found a boat and they crossed.

Not far away they caught a glimpse of a big village. From there came the noise of human voices and the roar of many lorries.

Several Dodges with American flags on their radiators were parked near the edge of the village.

Bürke coughed, went purple, raised his hands and walked on. Behind him the others did the same, only Lindemann, being a civilian, walked with his hands down.

The American soldiers met them very unhospitably and led them through the village. One of them even gave Bürke a cuff on the neck. The Americans, and particularly a Negro among them, looked at the Germans with hatred. In the Headquarters of the unit to which they were taken they were questioned briefly by an American captain. His voice rang with obvious hostility.

When he went out Bürke glanced angrily at the disconcerted Lindemann, but said nothing.

Late at night they were taken from Headquarters and led under guard to another house.

An American officer—a colonel, as it turned out later—addressed Lindemann in good German: he was surprised to see a civilian before him. Lindemann at once began to speak English. The Colonel invited him to sit down. They conversed animatedly and as he listened to Lindemann the American kept on repeating thoughtfully:

"Yes.... Yes...."

From time to time the Colonel shot a penetrating glance from his little, piercing eyes at Bürke and the others. The Germans, ragged, unshaven and gloomy, stood in a row by the wall.

Intelligence agent—thought Bürke, watching the American sullenly. The American, a tall, thin man with a black moustache and lean, hairy hands, smoked a cigarette. His glance rested for a moment on Bürke and with a grin he asked in German:

"Well then, gentlemen? So you got away from the Russians? Well, you were lucky!..."

He left the room. Tense silence reigned. The Colonel returned with another officer, whose chest was decorated with numerous medal ribbons. He was a shortish man, plump and cheerful; he constantly rubbed his little hands, picked up one paper after another from the table and, after glancing at them, threw them back again. Then he started walking up and down past the Germans standing by the wall, saying something jokingly to Lindemann. Lindemann laughed restrainedly.

Bürke could understand nothing of what was going on around him, and looked longingly first at one, then the other, waiting for his fate to be decided, and growing more and more alarmed. Suddenly the little American came up to him and asked:

"SS?"

"N-no," said Bürke.

"We know, we know!" the American laughed cunningly and cheerfully, and again went away to the table.

The rest happened quickly and unexpectedly. Lindemann stood up, bowed politely, and the Germans left the Headquarters. An American Sergeant turned up in front of them, said something to Lindemann and disappeared. The Germans went into a house on the edge of the village. Civilian clothes were lying about there, and Lindemann said quickly:

"Change your clothes."

The industrialist whispered to Bürke that he, Lindemann, was allowed to go home, to his villa near Munich, and wait there for orders from the American authorities.

"You know what? Come with me," suggested Lindemann and added quietly:

"They were extremely well-disposed towards you, quite gentlemanly, beyond all expectation. These are

clever people, businesslike, not bawlers. . . . It's pleasant to deal with them, isn't it?"

Bürke changed with feverish haste. At last they left. Bürke walked along, looking round every minute—at the bottom of his heart he still suspected that this was an ill-intentioned joke and that he would be stopped at any moment. But no one stopped him. Everything turned out beautifully!

XXVII

In the division nothing was known yet about Lubentsov when the member of the Military Council General Sizokrylov flew to Potsdam.

Berlin had already capitulated. The Germans had ceased resistance everywhere, and the commandant of the city General Weidling together with his staff had surrendered to General Chuikov.

After visiting Berlin, General Sizokrylov had come to learn about our troops west of the city. The roads were crowded with columns of Germans, from the group which had attempted to break through to the west and had either been captured or surrendered.

General Sereda reported all that had happened to the member of the Military Council. The order for the division to move on to the west, to the Elbe, had just arrived. The Divisional Commander was overjoyed as, indeed, were all the soldiers and officers of the division.

The soldiers formed ranks. The drivers started their lorries.

Just before taking off Sizokrylov asked:

"How is your daughter?"

"Very well," replied Taras Petrovich. "She is at Sans-Souci now, looking over the palace."

Suddenly Sizokrylov said:

"Couldn't you let your daughter come along with me. It would be interesting for her to have a look at Berlin." After a pause he added: "My wife is flying from Moscow today, and I should like her to meet your daughter."

The Divisional Commander at once sent a car for Vika.

While waiting for the girl, Sizokrylov paced about the green sward of the aerodrome.

Anna Konstantinovna already knew about the death of her son. On the night of the First of May Sizokrylov had come to a decision. He had called up Moscow. The operator in the central exchange in Moscow put him through to his flat. Sizokrylov had thought over in advance everything he would say, and wanted to begin with best wishes for the First of May, but when he heard his wife's voice he said:

"It's me, Anna. Take a grip on yourself. You must know everything, everything!"

She at once understood. And the first words he heard after her cry were:

"My dear, don't torture yourself!... We'll bear everything!"

She could say no more and he sat holding the receiver close to his ear and waiting. His hand was trembling, and when another telephone rang he picked up the other receiver and, holding both receivers to his ears, forced himself to answer the Front Commander:

"Please, ring up in ten minutes! I can't answer now."

He put down one receiver and went on holding the other. At last he said:

"Any! Dear!"

Then he heard the sound of sobbing and he kept silent and thought how well one could hear sobbing so many thousands of kilometres away.

"Fly here, to me," he said. "Take some leave. For a few days at least. I'll arrange about the plane."

He put down the receiver and rang up the Front Commander.

"What's new?" he asked, looking at his hand, which was still trembling.

The Commander said that Chief of the General Staff Infantry General Krebs and two officers—Colonel Duffing and Lieutenant-Colonel Seifert—had just come to conduct talks with Chuikov. They had brought a letter signed by Goebbels which the Commander read over the telephone:

"We wish to inform the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces of the Soviet Union the following: first among non-Germans, we inform you, the leader of the Soviet peoples, that today, 30th April, at 15:50, the Führer of the German people Adolf Hitler committed suicide."

"What do you think?" asked the Commander. "Is it true or are they lying?"

Sizokrylov said:

"Most probably true. Fled from responsibility to the other world—through the last door that was open to him. Has it been reported to the High Command?"

"It has. We've had a directive from there: the only possible terms—unconditional surrender."

On the first of May Goebbels committed suicide. The next day the Berlin garrison capitulated.

Sizokrylov flew to Berlin, from there to Spandau and, finally to Potsdam. It was here that he suddenly thought it would be a good idea to take that nice girl Vika, the Divisional Commander's daughter, with him. It seemed to him that the presence of the orphan girl would bring some comfort to the maternal heart of Anna Konstantinovna.

Vika soon arrived. On learning why she had been called, she was overjoyed. But as she ran up to the member of the Military Council, she thought fit to conceal her delight, so she tried to restrain her smile, as she said politely:

"Thanks! I dreamed so much of going to Berlin!"

The aeroplane stood not far away, spreading its huge white wings over the green landing ground of the aerodrome.

Vika mounted the ladder nimbly and sat down on a soft seat. Sizokrylov followed her. The engines roared and the plane, gathering speed over the grass, left the ground. Beneath them stretched the green squares of fields and forests, roads gleaming in the sun, tiny houses. The shadow of the aeroplane in the bright sunlight flitted across the ground. It was soon darting over the roofs of the city.

The member of the Military Council's car and the armoured carrier were waiting for him at Tempelhof airport.

The General was told that Franz Ewald, who had just arrived from Neu-Köln, was expecting him.

Sizokrylov went quickly into the house where the German Communist was waiting. They shook hands vigorously. Both of middle age, their hair greyed by the trials of life, they looked at each other and both smiled with a warm feeling of friendship.

"Not bad, you don't look bad at all!" said Sizokrylov. "You still stand well on your feet. . . . And Hitler couldn't do away with you! . . ."

"He did not," laughed Ewald. "My bones are still sound. . . ."

"So much for your bones but what about your heart?"

Ewald waved his hand:

"No good for falling in love, but all right for work. . . ."

They both laughed. Nevertheless, Sizokrylov was keenly aware of the pale emaciated appearance of the German Communist. Ewald at once began to relate how he had found several old friends in Neu-Köln, and had talked to the young people there.

"Of course, they have not yet awakened," he said, "there's a lot that's not clear to them still, but if you could work with them. . . ."

The General invited Ewald to make a journey into the centre of Berlin. Ewald agreed delightedly. He wanted to get to Siemensstadt and Wedding, "Red Wedding," as this factory district of Berlin had been called at one time. Ewald knew every inch of it. He hoped to find some people he knew there too, and renew party ties. He had to get in touch with the workers, have a talk with them, and explain the situation.

They went out to Vika, who was waiting in the car, got in and drove off.

Berlin looked like a huge, armed camp. Soviet troops and rear services, artillery and tanks were bivouacking in the streets and squares. People were scurrying about the huge, ruined buildings; carts passed by slowly. Tethered horses neighed in the stone skeletons of the houses, burying their heads in bundles of hay.

Weather-beaten faces, sunburned and cheerful, smiled a happy welcome. Traffic regulators stood at the cross-roads, directing traffic. Sappers and special squads were clearing away the rubble, demining the approaches to houses, dragging aside smashed German lorries and armoured carriers, destroying barricades.

Ewald had not been in Berlin for eight years. But once, when he was being transferred from prison at Moabit somewhere to the west, he had seen the town through the window of a prison van. That was in 1939. Berlin was all decorated with huge swastika flags: the day before, Hitler had seized Prague.

Now, red banners were waving everywhere, alternating with the white flags of surrender. To tell the truth, Ewald looked at first at the ruined city with a certain malicious joy: this is what had come of the rule of that mad, self-admiring cretin and his accomplices! But malicious joy at once changed to deep compassion for the famished women scurrying about the streets, for the pale, thin children, who were extremely interested in what

was going on, for the desolate lines of prisoners trailing along Blücherstrasse to the south, for the whole suffering people.

Ewald's eyes were burning feverishly. His face was very pale.

Along Blücherstrasse they drove up to the Landwehr Canal. The bridge across the canal had been badly damaged, blown up in the middle, but the sappers had already repaired it for car traffic.

On Belle Alliance Square Sizokrylov met other generals. Then another one drove up. He jumped out of his car and walked up to the member of the Military Council.

"A-ah, Karelin!" said Sizokrylov. "How are things?"

"Everything's in order, Comrade General!" boomed Karelin, beaming. "We are ready to proceed further!..." He suddenly became confused, his smile vanished and he asked distrustfully:

"What are the orders?"

Sizokrylov chuckled and said:

"Don't worry, Karelin. I shan't take your petrol."

They drove along Friedrichstrasse. The wide street was completely destroyed, and through the huge gaps in the house walls one could see other houses, also ruined, on other streets.

Vika had seen plenty during the war, but she was astonished and frightened by the huge amount of destruction. She looked compassionately at the people wandering among the ruins and wondered where they could be living. Then she noticed Ewald sitting next to her, dozing from fatigue. So it seemed to Vika. The German sat with closed eyes, muttering something.

Ewald, however, was not sleeping. He had simply forgotten that there was anyone with him. Accustomed to living in solitary confinement, he talked aloud without noticing it himself. He cursed the Hitlerites and their

criminal, insane conduct of affairs, their bloodthirsty, vile policy. He regretted his old age and weak heart, that his hair was grey and that there was no longer that strength, that youthful spirit in him, which was so much needed now, in order to put the new Germany on her feet.

Then he shook himself, opened his eyes and encountered Sizokrylov's glance. The General nodded understandingly and said:

"Never mind, friend!... A rest is what you need. You must have a rest."

They drove out on to Unter-den-Linden. Here, everything was so cluttered with rubble and smashed German armament that they had to leave the car and continue on foot.

On the right in the centre of the street rose a big monument.

"Frederick," said Ewald.

They walked up to the monument. Frederick II, the work of Rauch. "Old Fritz," was sitting on his horse, lean and a little stooped, in an ermine cloak and three-cornered hat, staring down with an extremely thoughtful look at the debris and rubble and the gaping windows of ruined houses and also at the innumerable lines of prisoners wending their way eastwards in the direction of the Spree.

Sizokrylov held Vika's hand and feeling the girl's small hand in his, walked slowly, adjusting his stride to Vika's tiny steps. The soldiers hurrying about all round, stopped at the sight of the tall General and the girl, and looked in surprise at the grey-haired German in civilian clothes walking beside the General, and at the sub-machine gunners of the General's bodyguard pacing behind with the trim, stern lieutenant at their head.

Ewald hardly recognized the once luxurious buildings now turned into dreadful skeletons. Here was what had

once been a university, and there a library had stood. Theatres, restaurants and embassies were all one grey heap of stone. Over them hung lengths of torn and tangled wires. Here were the ruins of the Soviet embassy. Its staff had left for Moscow at the end of June 1941, turning over the debate to the Red Army.

Pointing into the distance, Ewald said:

"The Brandenburg Gate."

Vika quickened her pace. Soon they came out on to Paris Square, and the famous gate reared before them in all its beauty.

It was a big monument, over sixty metres wide and twenty-five metres high. Doric columns divided the gate into five arches. At the top gleamed the bronze hoofs of four galloping horses. In a hole left by a shell-splinter in the head of one of the horses a red banner had been inserted, which flamed like a ball of fire on the background of grey smoke still hanging over the city.

Near the arch the General stopped. Vika raised her eyes questioningly, but the General was not looking at the famous gate. His gaze was fixed on the Soviet tanks passing through.

One after the other, gleaming with red flags, the Soviet tanks passed beneath the Brandenburg Gate and disappeared in the misty distance of the Charlottenburg Chausse. The tanks moved on unhurriedly, thoughtfully, as it were, running their huge tracks over the slabs of paving.

The General at last tore his glance away from the tanks and went on slowly.

Passing the Brandenburg Gate they turned to the right, to the huge building of the Reichstag, over whose glass cupola there also floated a red banner,—The Banner of Victory.

On the massive steps of the German parliament soldiers were eating. Steam was rising from the mess-tins.

Suddenly everyone jumped up. A colonel and several other officers came out of the Reichstag. They approached the member of the Military Council, and the Colonel stood at attention and reported ceremoniously:

"Comrade Lieutenant-General, the regiment has captured the Reichstag and erected the Banner of Victory upon it, and is now resting."

"Show us your heroes," said Sizokrylov. "Where are they, those lions of yours?"

The soldiers began running hither and thither, short, sharp orders were heard somewhere on the steps and inside the walls of the half-ruined monster, and soon several dozen men—soldiers and officers—came out to the member of the Military Council. They descended the broad steps and as if considering their feat again, but now from the point of view of the Military Council, they glanced up at the mighty columns and the thick walls of the Reichstag.

Here there were Sergeant Yegorov and Junior Sergeant Kantaria, the two scouts who had hoisted above the Reichstag the very banner which now floated there, at the dizzy height of over seventy metres. Captain Neustroyev, Senior Sergeant Syanov, Senior Lieutenants Samsonov and Gusev, Sergeant Ivanov, soldiers Saburov and Savenkov and many others came up. Only those who had fallen in the assault and were now buried in the shady avenues of the Tiergarten were not there.

The heroes of the assault came towards the General, smiling calmly, tired as the devil. While Sizokrylov spoke with them, Ewald was telling the inquisitive Vika about this grim massive building. It had been built fifty years ago in the style of the Italian Renaissance but, of course, embellished with Prussian heaviness and pomposity.

Ewald led Vika to the western entrance, where stood a mighty six-columned portico crowned with a huge

woman on horseback—Germania, as Ewald explained. Over the massive doors, now flung wide open, was a Saint George, with a face like Bismarck's, killing a dragon.

A big monument to Bismarck stood nearby. The old Junker in a cuirassier's uniform with a sword in his hand looked down grimly at Vika from the red granite pedestal.

A tall column rose out of the thick foliage behind Bismarck, the so-called Column of Victory, decorated with all manner of bas-reliefs and high reliefs, each one telling of the same thing: of the military might of Prussia and her victories. Southwards from the column ran an avenue lined with statues, which was called the Avenue of Victory. Here there were thirty-two monuments, sixteen on each side. Behind each statue of a Prussian lord was a semicircular marble seat with two busts of his companions-in-arms or his boon companions. Many of the statues had been badly damaged by bullets and splinters.

Ewald patiently told Vika the name of each Prussian markgraf, kurfürst and king: Albrecht the Bear, Otto I, Otto II. . . . Behind them on the benches sat innumerable dukes, princes, counts and burggrafs, cardinals and bishops, knights and barons, masters and provosts, fieldmarshals and hofmeisters, chancellors and councillors.

Vika was in the heart of old Prussia, pompous, warlike and greedy for the property of others.

Soldiers followed slowly behind Vika and Ewald listening to the explanations and glancing at each other meaningfully. One of them came up closer and said:

"I saw Goebbels. All burnt. Even dead, he was afraid of falling into our hands—gave orders that he should be burned."

After looking over the Avenue of Victory, Vika and Ewald returned to the member of the Military Council,

who was still talking animatedly with the soldiers and officers.

"Comrade General," one of the soldiers invited Sizokrylov, "come and pay us a visit in the Reichstag."

They mounted the steps of the south entrance. Everything here bore the traces of the recent battle. Under the arches hung the smoke of lately quenched fires. Somewhere something was still burning. Broken furniture was lying about everywhere. The walls and ceilings were full of gaping holes.

As they showed the General one corner after another and conducted him round the enormous rooms, the soldiers told about the fierce fighting with the Germans barricaded here. Then they passed through corridors into a large hall and went on thence through dark, half ruined lobbies to the assembly hall.

This was a high, capacious chamber beneath a glass cupola. Half the cupola had been shattered and a bright shaft of sunlight fell on the oak walls torn with splinters, and on the bullet-riddled ornaments and coats-of-arms.

Adolf Hitler had once held forth from this rostrum.

But Franz Ewald remembered many other things connected with this hall. These walls had once heard the fiery speeches of August Bebel, Karl Liebknecht, Klara Zetkin, Wilhelm Pieck, the calm firm voice of Ernst Thälmann.

Ewald's face twisted with a shudder. He raised his eyes to the General and said quietly:

"It's time for me to go."

They left the Reichstag. The General looked at his watch.

"I wish you success," he said, shaking hands with Ewald.

Ewald left and, as she watched him go, Vika said thoughtfully:

"If all Germans were as good as that, my mother would still be alive."

Sizokrylov took her hand gently and they walked slowly to Unter-den-Linden, where the cars were waiting for them.

XXVIII

What a bright, unusual day it was!

For Tanya it began with being awakened at dawn by firing. Then a nurse ran in, pretty frightened, who said that the Germans had attacked the Medical Battalion.

A large group of armed Germans—some of those who had forced their way out of Berlin—had indeed appeared in Falkenhagen. The Medical Battalion had to engage them. Doctors, nurses and hospital attendants, together with the veterinary staff from a nearby veterinary hospital and charwomen from the divisional bath-laundry section, put up a real defence and, although they shouted more than they fired, the Germans nevertheless retreated and disappeared. In the first minutes of fear Tanya at once thought of Lubentsov: where was he now, had he run into the Germans at night, and how good if he were here now—he would have sent these Germans packing in two shakes.

By midday everything was over and Tanya prepared to go to Potsdam. She had chosen beforehand one of the many cars abandoned by the Germans and standing about in large numbers on the streets. Rutkovsky had given permission for her and Glasha to be away for the day.

Many people advised her not to go because the roads were not safe yet, but it seemed to her unthinkable to miss a chance of seeing Lubentsov.

However, at one o'clock in the afternoon an order arrived for the battalion to prepare to move. The division was being shifted: it was to go further on to the west.

Whether she liked it or not she had to abandon the trip. But while Tanya was packing her things the little cook from Zhmerinka ran in and, controlling her excitement with difficulty, said:

"Tanya Vladimirovna, someone is asking for you! A horseman."

Tanya flushed with joy, thinking that it was Lubentsov who had arrived.

She went out quickly into the street and caught sight of a horseman in the distance. It was not Lubentsov but his young orderly. His horse was covered with foam. Tanya looked at Kablukov's face, went pale and asked:

"What's happened to the Major of the Guards?"

Kablukov said:

"He was wounded by the fascists."

"Where is he?" asked Tanya.

"I don't know," Kablukov answered. "He has probably been taken to Headquarters. He's very bad. Unconscious. They say that he won't. . . ."

Rutkovsky and Masha came up.

"I am going," said Tanya.

Rutkovsky went over to the drivers. They filled up the car. Maria Ivanovna ran to find Glasha. She came, all ready to go with Tanya.

"Give me a map," said Tanya. Rutkovsky handed her one.

Kablukov waited for a moment, then lashed his horse and galloped away.

Tanya sat down at the wheel, but either the battery was run down or Tanya was nervous, for the car would not be made to start. Then the Medical Battalion women shoved the car from behind and it started up at last.

After leaving Falkenhagen Tanya drove due south, towards the main road. The roads were full of soldiers. All were moving west. The sun shone brightly. Everyone was hot and cheerful. Laughter and jokes reached Tanya's

ears. The car progressed slowly. Soldiers marched along beside it, they looked in at the windows and, noticing the two women, nodded their heads to them welcomingly and joked about husbands and bridegrooms and children soon to be.

"... And how I let him have it with a grenade!" said a deep voice beside the car and went on relating something, but what he said could no longer be heard, and in its place came another thin voice, almost that of a child:

"... just think—to go stunning fish with grenades!"

And this voice dropped away behind somewhere, and someone else's voice, loud and mischievous, began a story about a German colonel who brought his whole regiment with him to surrender.

I am finished, thought Tanya, gripping the wheel until the blood went out of her hands, my life's finished. It's the end of my life. My whole life. There will be nothing more!

Glasha sat silently beside her, and tears rolled down her face but she kept trying to wipe them away surreptitiously, turning aside. But outside the windows, there were people too and she had nowhere to go with her tears.

Crossing the main road, they drove out on to a road which was comparatively empty, and here Tanya drove very fast. At a crossroads she stopped the car and glanced at the map. She turned right. Again they were amid the uproar of moving troops. They arrived in a big village. Soldiers were walking along the street, and Glasha suddenly shouted:

"Ours! Our division!"

She had recognized Major Garin. He was standing on the steps of a house. In his hands were leaflets, which he was giving out to the soldiers.

Tanya stopped the car. Glasha stepped out and running up to Garin, said:

"Hullo, Comrade Major! It's me, Korotchenkoval!"

He at once recognized her and was a little embarrassed, for he felt guilty before this big, kind woman.

"Well, how's work?" he asked. "Where are you?"

Glasha badly wanted to find out something about Veselchakov, but she asked first of all about Lubentsov.

Garin shook his head:

"He went out to them with a white flag as an envoy. They say he's been killed. I have not been to Divisional Headquarters yet. So much to do in the units. Yes... that's not even war, just sheer fascism! A pity they didn't manage to catch those who shot him. They made a bolt somewhere! We'll get them too, never mind!"

Mechanically he offered Glasha a leaflet and moved away.

Glasha ran after him and asked:

"But where is Divisional Headquarters?"

"It's been shifted. We are moving on to the Elbe. The Divisional Commander's probably at Etzin... about twenty kilometres northwest of here."

Glasha went back to the car and told Tanya where to go. She did not say a word about the rest. They drove off. Glasha glanced at the leaflet. It was Stalin's order commending the troops who had taken the German capital.

"And thanks to us too," said Glasha.

Tanya said:

"Read it out loud."

Glasha read out the order. She read slowly, distinctly pronouncing the names of the generals and colonels whose troops had taken part in the capture of Berlin. And gradually lowering her voice she finished very quietly with Stalin's famous words, which rang out like a bell:

"Eternal glory to the heroes who have fallen in the struggle for the freedom and independence of our native land!"

They stopped at a canal crossing, where many cars were assembled. Tanya sat motionless at the wheel, waiting until they could move on. She looked at the huge treaded wheels of a big lorry standing in front. The lorry hummed dully. Its wheels moved slightly backwards and forwards. At last they moved forward in earnest. Tanya drove behind it, then the wheels of the lorry stopped again, and Tanya stopped. She looked at those wheels until she hated them from the bottom of her soul. They would not budge and the engine hummed monotonously.

At last they moved off. They crossed the bridge to the west bank of the canal. About two kilometres further on Tanya noticed a mound to the left of the road, on it there stood a group of people near a freshly-dug grave.

Probably it was the westernmost Russian war grave. Over it was a wooden obelisk with a red star. The soldiers standing round took off their caps in silence. The branches of the old trees swayed above it. Tanya pulled up the car and switched off the engine. It stopped at once, as if for ever. Tanya got out of the car. She walked quickly, and only at the grave itself did she slow her pace. The men standing by the grave heard her footsteps and turned their heads slowly towards her.

She walked up the mound, stood still for a minute, then went right up to the obelisk itself.

Under the star on the wooden board was written:

SOLDIER SERGEI IVANOV

Born 1925

Brutally murdered by fascists

2nd May 1945

Glory to a hero!

Tanya read this small inscription for some time. At last she stirred. Glasha was calling her.

Near the car stood three horsemen. They were dressed in green camouflage capes and were looking keenly at

the woman who walked slowly away from the grave-mound.

One of them was a youth with big serious eyes, the second—a slant-eyed man with an immobile face the colour of brick, the third—a small, restless fellow with a thin smiling face. All three looked at Tanya, seeming to size her up, a little surprised and perhaps approving.

"Alive!" shouted Glasha at the top of her voice, and repeated more quietly, amid tears: "Alive!"

The young man introduced himself: "Captain Meshchersky." Then he said: "The Major of the Guards is quite near, in that village."

Near the house where Lubentsov was lying wounded, Tanya met Dr. Myshkin. He did not understand why she was there, and thought that she had been called for consultation. Thus he told Tanya in particular detail about the condition of the scout. Lubentsov had been wounded by a bullet in the chest below the heart, and by another which had only scratched his right thigh.

"A serious case," said Myshkin, "but there is no danger to his life. And that powerful constitution of his will stand it. He's a man who can stand anything!"

Myshkin was surprised that when Tanya went up to Lubentsov, who was lying with his eyes closed, she did not examine the wound at all, but sat down on the floor by the bed and pressed her cheek to the still hand of the scout.

Then she raised her eyes and noticed a familiar face, but could not remember at all where she had met this young captain. At last she remembered: it was the "owner" of that same carriage in which she had met Lubentsov.

Glasha, who had come in behind Tanya, also noticed Chokhov, and beckoning to him, went outside with him into the street, to find out, at last, where her Veselchakov was. Veselchakov was near at hand in the next village, and Glasha ran there.

And then Lubentsov opened his eyes and saw Tanya.

Soldiers were passing the windows and their shadows turned the room from light to dark, and it seemed to Lubentsov that he was in a train and the shadows of trees were passing the windows. I'm on my way home already, thought Lubentsov, and together with Tanya. Ah, how good! . . . He smiled at her, and in the room, as in a train, it grew now light, now dark. It was the soldiers marching past the windows, and a happiness to remember all one's life: the face of the woman one loves, the thought: I am on my way home, and the victorious Soviet soldiers moving westwards, further and further westwards.

XXIX

The divisions moved straight on to the Elbe, and the sunlit roads were swarming with troops. Infantry, lorries, long-barrelled guns and blunt-nosed howitzers drove, rumbling and hooting, in an endless stream westwards.

From time to time came monotonous shouts: "Right wheel!", the traffic regulators at the crossroads waved their flags. The soldiers' capes billowed and flapped in the gusts of a fresh breeze.

The men swung along with free, broad strides as if the campaign had only just begun. Siberians, Volga men, Uralians, Moscovites, Ukrainians, slant-eyed dwellers of Asia, dark sons of the Caucasus marched the roads of Germany, while ahead of the columns floated the regimental standards now liberated from their grey campaign sheaths.

A rifle company goes by, a young grey-eyed captain on a big horse riding at its head. A black-moustached senior sergeant with kind, clever eyes swings along at an easy pace in front of the company. A huge sergeant-major with such a sunburnt face that his fair hair seems

white, is bringing up the rear. His voice thunders powerfully, drowning the noise of the main road.

"Brace up! Don't straggle!"

The signallers keep on along the side of the road, unwinding their coils of wire. In front of them marches a slim young lieutenant. From time to time he stops, sits down on the grass and shouts into a telephone receiver:

"This is Nikolsky! Are you receiving? I'm moving on!..."

A pontoon battalion flashes past. In a car in front of the battalion rides a little, elderly unimpressive general of the engineers. Small boats, still wet from the last crossing, are lashed to the enormous pontoons. The sappers look proud, as if asking:

"Any more crossings to make? Where else do you want a bridge built? With pleasure. Wherever Stalin gives the order!"

The artillery is on the move. The artillerymen cling to the huge guns. Others look out from under the tarpaulin covering of the lorries, they joke and shout good-naturedly at the infantry:

"Dusty infantry!"

"Hail, queen of battle!"

Was there not a glimpse from under the tarpaulin of that unforgettable, kind, red nose?

Many are the roads from the German capital to the west and they are all crammed with men and machines.

Along one of them stream lorries loaded with tents and medical supplies, with sweet laughing women, their hair ruffled in the wind, sitting high upon them. There are Tanya and Glasha and Maria Ivanovna, and the little cook from Zhmerinka and dozens of others.

At the sight of the women the soldiers smarten up, straighten their shoulders and, of course, remember their own Tanyas and Glashas back there, far away in their homeland.

On one of the roads General Sereda and Colonel Plotnikov, standing side by side, meet their division. The regiments have passed, gone are the mounted scouts in camouflage cloaks: Captain Meshchersky, Sergeant Voronin, who will soon be taking up the peaceful cobbler's hammer, Sergeant Mitrokhin ready to return to the foundry.

Suddenly the General is on the alert.

"What? More nonsense! Disgracing the division again?"

Round a bend in the road comes a carriage. It is a real baronial carriage covered with purple varnish. True, this feudal vehicle has fallen into the whirlpool of war and grown rather dull and dusty. It is leaning over to one side a little, its purple and gold are very scratched, a children's pram rests on the footmen's steps, and the coat of arms, with its stag's head, castle battlements and knight's helmet and visor, have been spattered with mud.

Taras Petrovich calms down at once: there are no soldiers in the carriage, only foreigners. On the coachman's seat sits a beautiful, fair-haired Dutch girl. Her hair gleams red-gold in the sun. She is smiling to the Russian soldiers, her liberators. At the sight of the Russian chiefs she evidently feels shy and turns off the road, and the carriage soon disappears down a lane.

"Going home," says Plotnikov, waving to them. "Happy journey, comrades."

To the left of the road in an endless line eastwards stream the prisoners. From houses and cellars German men and women come out quietly. The children run out. Plotnikov looks at them and says in an undertone:

"Have they understood something, these Germans?"

"How can they fail to understand?" grins Taras Petrovich, waving his hand toward the Soviet forces moving along the road. "Anybody can understand that!..."

Plotnikov says:

"That's true, but it's still not everything. They must have a broader, deeper understanding of what has happened! . . . Well, let's wish them sense and understanding!"

Motorcyclists appear and flash quickly by. Behind them one can hear a dull roar of engines. Tanks with red stars on their sides move slowly westward under the red flags flying at their turrets. They do not hurry and their huge caterpillar tracks run over the asphalt road somewhat deliberately.

Simultaneously, aircraft appear in the sky and everyone glances upwards to admire the neat formations of bombers, fighters and stormoviks.

But now a car has appeared on the road. Behind it follows the unflagging armoured troop carrier with its heavy calibre machine gun pointing threateningly upwards. A hush descends on the road. The soldiers and officers smarten up. They recognize the car at once: in it is the member of the Military Council; he does not like joking; he wants everything to be in order.

General Sizokrylov stared hard through the wind-screen. Sometimes his glance wandered absently over the faces of the soldiers marching or resting under roadside trees, then he again fixed his eyes ahead on the endless white ribbon of road gleaming in the sunshine.

After passing the infantry, the tanks and mechanized troops, the General soon drove into a long straggling German village, on the main square of which stood a heavy granite monument. Driving past it, the General's car climbed a hill. Before them stretched the smooth surface of a big river. On the left a ruined stone bridge lay in a heap of rubble. To the right on the river floated a lone sail. A cutter puffed smoke near the opposite bank.

Here on the near bank Soviet soldiers were lying and standing on the grass and under the trees. Not far away

a field kitchen was smoking. Birds were singing in a nearby wood.

But what surprised the General was the stillness that surrounded them.

All round there was a great silence. The soldiers listened to it with surprise. No clatter of machine guns, no whistle of bullets, no crash of mines. Nearby in the river-side marshes the frogs were croaking furiously.

A big ginger cat walked slowly along the cornice of the last house in the village, its tail sticking up like a chimney. The birds sang. That was a finch tapping. That was the trill of a land rail. There was a snipe moaning. And that was some unknown call: some local bird or other, a German one, a real puzzler.

Meanwhile the cutter at the other bank had cast off, boats followed it across the river. The General waited. The cutter came nearer and nearer. The men on deck were waving their hands. A band was booming. At last the cutter vanished under the steep bank and then the American soldiers came running up the slope.

Their joyful shouts rang out at once:

"Long live Stalin!"

"Long live Russia!"

A group of officers with a general among them made towards the member of the Military Council. They came nearer. Two officers near the American General stepped out ahead. One of them was tall and thin, with a black moustache and lank, hairy hands, and the other—small, very cheerful, with a big row of medals.

This little one spoke Russian excellently. He said:

"The General, on behalf of the Command of the American Army, congratulates you on the occasion of the victorious conclusion of the war."

When he had heard Sizokrylov's answer expressing the hope that now the allies would work together in friendly agreement to build a democratic, peace-loving

Germany and universal peace, the American nodded delightedly and translated the reply to the American General, who was, he said, in complete agreement with the Soviet General.

The American with the hairy hands nodded his head amiably.

Alongside, Russian soldiers were talking to the Americans. Of course, they talked more with gestures than words, but nevertheless they talked.

"*Poryadok?*"* asked one of the Russian soldiers.

"*Poriatok,*" repeated an American soldier smiling broadly, and then added after his own fashion: "Okay!"

"Okay," repeated the Russian soldier, smiling as broadly.

Then the Americans left, and Sizokrylov walked along the bank.

Suddenly something stirred near the General's legs, and out of a little, freshly-made dugout climbed a ginger-moustached soldier.

Bumping into the General, he coughed, pulled down his tunic and stood at attention. But noticing a warm, kindly glow in the eyes of the member of the Military Council, the soldier made a sweeping gesture and said:

"Well, Comrade General, this here war...it's over? Stillness, what stillness! Hurts your ears!..."

The General said:

"Yes, the war's over."

The soldier stood for a while, then two tears gleamed in his eyes. They rolled down his cheeks and got stuck in his red whiskers.

"And what am I crying for, like an old fool?" he said, as if puzzled.

The General looked at the river, clenched his teeth and could not say anything in reply.

* Everything all right?

"Sorry for the dead," the soldier answered himself. "And it's from joy, too." He looked round at the trench, out of which he had just climbed, and said: "And from habit I've dug myself a trench, an individual fox-hole, so to say, just in case. Well, soon I'll be back in Siberia. I'm in a kolkhoz there, in the Krasnoyarsky district. And I'll be going for walks with my Vasilissa Karpovna. . . . Think of it, eh? Why, if we come out on to some open space in a field or meadow, where the land is flat, maybe the first days I'll be digging myself a trench too. . . ."

The soldier listened again to the stillness and said quietly:

"Thanks to Stalin."

Yes, thanks to him, thought the member of the Military Council, looking at the glistening waters of the Elbe. Thanks to his mighty mind, iron endurance, incomparable resolve and measureless foresight. To the Party which he fashioned, the Army which he created, the people whom he raised to such great heights, thanks!

The General's thoughts floated far away to his native land, whence all these soldiers had come, and his stern heart trembled with love. The soil there gives enough wheat, wine and cotton; the earth abundant metal and coal. And most important of all, it is inhabited by unselfish and honest people. It seemed to the General that he could hear now her calm, even breathing. Conscious of her mighty strength, peace-loving and formidable, she comes into the world—hope of the oppressed, dread to the oppressors.

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